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OR, The Black Stake Rivals.

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AUTHOR OF "WILD WEST WALT," "COLORADO
RUBE," "WILD DICK TURPIN,"
"DEEP DUKE," ETC.

CHAPTER I. DONE IN THE DARK.

It was a place where dangerous, lawless men were quite as common as honest persons, and the young man who was passing through the dark wood came to a halt, as the crackling of dry twigs and the sound of voices warned him that he was not alone in the underbrush.

He paused, with one hand on his revolver and the other grasping a sapling to steady himself, and, peering ahead, tried to make out what was before him.

The hour was nearing midnight, and the wood had seemed deserted by all save him until he nearly run upon this party. It was a dark, tangled wood, which every one would not have cared to pass through by night, but it was a

novelty to him, and he certainly was not the man to shrink from real or imaginary perils.

But these other men in the wood—who and what were they? He had no desire to press forward and ask of them, so he stood still and listened.

They seemed engaged upon some task, but what it was he could not tell. They spoke in a desultory way, but their voices were not distinct. At the end of five minutes he had heard but one word—Girdrock. A peculiar name, but he judged that it was that of some one of the party.

Then came evidence that their work was done. There was a general bustle, a few words in a commanding voice, and with heavy steps they began moving away.

Allan Hamilton did not follow. In his opinion he had no interest in the party; he was merely a visitor to Kentucky, would soon be gone, and the State must manage its concerns and its citizens for itself.

He stood perfectly still until the last sounds of their retreat had died away.

"Probably they are not worth a thought," he then muttered; "but after all the talk I've heard about moonshiners and outlaws, I feel inclined to doubt every one I see. Perhaps I can learn what they were about."

He advanced, looking sharply as he neared the exact place where they had stood, but was unable to penetrate the darkness with his gaze. His first real discovery came when he ran against something which first bounded away after the collision, and then came back and struck him lightly in return.

It was an experience which puzzled him far more than could easily be explained, for he could think of nothing which would naturally act thus; but there was a dark object in front of him, plainly neither tree nor stone, but much softer, and swinging idly around.

What could it be?

He put out one hand to investigate, and then started back suddenly. His fingers had closed upon another human hand, but the contact had sent a thrill of fear through his being which no personal peril could have inspired. The hand he had touched had been in a curious state, between heat and cold, which startled him and suggested a terrible suspicion.

One moment of delay followed, and then he sprung forward with both hands outstretched. It required only a brief examination to show what the unknown men had been doing.

Murder had been done, and the victim hung swinging there forsaken by all save him!

Hamilton was a man of quick resolution and action. Promptly he raised the body, the feet of which almost touched the ground, and, finding it difficult to loosen the noose, he cut it away. Then he lowered his burden and cast the rope off the neck.

There was no doubt in his mind that the man was dead, but he would leave nothing undone to save him. He felt of pulse and heart—both were perfectly still. More than this, the temperature of the body was that of one for some time dead, and he believed he could discern the approach of *rigor mortis* in the muscles of the face and neck.

Probably death had ensued three hours before.

Seeing this, Hamilton abandoned his efforts, found a pine knot and soon turned it into a torch. With this he examined the deceased. He was one who had not seen his twentieth year, and not only looked honest and inoffensive, but seemingly had been but half-witted. His dress was that of an extremely poor person, and Allan wondered how he had ever made himself so dangerous, or disagreeable, to any one, as to bring such a fate upon his head.

"Some poor village boy," the young man thought, "but I don't know who. Well, somebody who does know must hear of this without delay. It would be folly to try and find the murderers, so I am off to notify Reynolds."

Carefully calculating the points of compass he started on his trip, using considerable haste. His mind was filled with indignation at what he had seen, and he longed to see the unknown men get their deserts.

Little did he suspect what a drama of crime and intrigue had preceded that tragedy of the night, or dream that he had taken the first step in a series of events so strange that all previous experiences in his life would be dwarfed in comparison.

It took him an hour to cover the comparatively short distance between him and the village, owing to the character of the wood. Once there he went to his own stopping-place, and proceeded to awaken his host.

This was a lawyer named Eben Reynolds.

The latter was a man well advanced in years, and he did not look particularly pleased when first aroused; but Allan's story awakened his zeal at once. Possibly he saw a case for himself ahead.

"Another murder!" he said, curtly. "They have a great taste for such things around here."

"I wonder you can endure life here."

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

"The more quarreling, the more work for those of my calling. Well, Allan, we'll attend

to this at once. I'll send a servant to notify the sheriff, and a party will soon be ready."

"Perhaps diligence on their part will put them in possession of the murderers at once."

"Zounds! you don't catch Abe Huger playing hide-and-seek in those woods by night. Hardly! And, by the way, don't give him any advice, or he will never find them. Abe is a grain obstinate in his way; also, sensitive; also, given to shooting, off-hand. Remember that he, not you, is sheriff."

It was well-meant advice, and Allan offered no remonstrance, but he felt more than ever like getting away from that region. He was not particularly pleased with life, men, and manners there.

The sheriff's party was finally ready, and Hamilton led them to where he had left the body, without trouble. His companions were not at a loss to identify it.

"Nat Wixon!" said Huger, in surprise. "Now, then, who's fallen foul *him*?"

"Who was he?" Reynolds asked.

"A stable-boy, an' about as harmful as a fly."

"He hadn't an enemy," put in another man.

"No; an' he hadn't the hoss-sense ter be a tool for anybody else. Now, then, who *could* 'a' did it?"

Hamilton suddenly stepped forward and picked up a scrap of white paper he had seen on the ground. He glanced at it, and then passed it over to Huger.

"This settles it," he observed.

The sheriff read.

"No, it don't settle it!" he retorted. "This is rank rubbish, an' a scurvy trick."

"What is it?" Reynolds inquired.

Some blamed idiot has printed on this, in big letters, 'So die all enemies to the moonshiners!' Bah! the trick is too thin. Nat Wixon didn't know enough ter be dangerous ter the moonshiners."

Allan Hamilton did not regard this argument as conclusive, but the unanimity with which all who had known Nat echoed the last words showed them to be of one mind.

"But," he argued, "you seem to be shutting out every reasonable explanation of the act."

"No, I ain't."

"Then you have a theory."

"Certain."

"May I venture to inquire what it is?"

Allan spoke curtly, for the sheriff's calm, indifferent, secretive manner annoyed him.

"Malicious mischief," Huger replied. "I've b'en aware fur some days that sev'ral strange men was hangin' around, an' I warned the town-folks ter look out fur them."

"So you did," Reynolds interpolated.

"I had an idea that they was bank robbers, or some such cattle. Now, I argue that my precautions skeered 'em off their game, an' out o' spite they jest dowsed the glim o' this hyar harmless boy."

Hamilton knit his brows in a dissenting frown. The possibility that the strange men had done the deed he was prepared to admit, but not that they had acted from "malicious mischief" alone.

And yet, in what way could the half-witted lad have been dangerous to them?

Suddenly Allan remembered something he had before forgotten.

"By the way, I heard one of the party called Girdrock."

"Girdrock, eh? Wal, that's clever. We hev a clew, at last, an' I expect ter put Mr. Girdrock's head in a noose. Anybody know him?"

"Nobody in the party did. It was a peculiar name, and new to them."

"Wal," said the sheriff, cheerfully, remembering his cosey bed at home, "all we kin do fur Nat to-night is to take his body home. To-morrer we'll find Girdrock an' Co., an' give 'em over ter the hangman."

His word was law in that party, and the first part of his plan was carried out. Hamilton and Reynolds walked behind the bearers of the body, and talked the matter over. The lawyer's interest had waned since he learned who the victim was, but with Allan it was different.

His sympathy was all the stronger because he judged that the others would not trouble themselves much to avenge simple Nat Wixon, and he longed to see the murderers hunted down.

CHAPTER II.

THE DAWN OF A NEW LIFE.

THE following morning found young Hamilton in the lawyer's office. Reynolds had been an old friend of his father, and, as the latter had recently died, it had been left to Reynolds to do many things, principally in the way of advice, about settling up the estate, though the Hamiltons had not even lived in the same State.

It was partly to consult with the lawyer, and partly to visit him, that Allan had come to Kentucky, and his stay was to be brief.

On this occasion Reynolds was busy over his papers, and Allan was reading the latest daily, when the door opened and a lady entered.

Up to that time Allan had taken but little interest in the people of the place, but a change was at hand. He no longer felt inclined to act the hermit. The new-comer was young, being, perhaps, twenty-two, and he at first glance pro-

nounced her the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

He had made the same remark before that day, aloud as well as mentally, but, certainly, he was excusable on this occasion. Marvelously lovely the girl was, with perfectly regular features, a fine form and a wealth of black hair. But it was her eyes that constituted her chief charm, and these were beyond description. Black as night, they had the radiance of the sun, and through them seemed to gleam a strong, intelligent mind, yet womanly, withal, which few women could equal.

It was a revelation to Allan Hamilton, who wondered vaguely if she was a human being like himself.

The lawyer set all doubts at rest by rising and bowing in his blandest manner.

"Good-morning, Miss Allison. I am pleased to see you, but must ask you to wait a few minutes. These papers must be filled out; they will not wait; and if you will kindly—"

"I will wait as you say, most certainly."

It was a calm, lady-like, well-modulated voice, but Allan believed he could detect a vein of impatience in it, as though she resented Reynolds's labored explanation and wished it cut short.

"Thank you," the lawyer replied. "And now, if I may venture, allow me to introduce my friend, Mr. Hamilton. Allan, this is Miss Carlotta Allison."

Allan had seen too much of the world to be abashed. He arose and acknowledged the introduction properly, yet, at the start, he was almost like one in a dream. He came out of that dream suddenly. Miss Allison turned her gaze full upon him, and, if he read her regard aright, she not only resented the introduction but was tempted to ignore it.

This she did not do; her part was gracefully, if not cordially done.

Then she sat down and looked out of the window as though he was to be dropped then and there. And such was doubtless her desire.

All that was combative in Allan's nature came at once to the front. He had been thinking scornfully of the people of the vicinity, which, certainly, was not the best part of the State of Kentucky, and now he did not relish being snubbed, even by a local belle and beauty.

A woman may be surpassingly beautiful, but a man of spirit objects to being trod in the dust under her dainty heel.

A sort of defiant daring possessed him, and he faced her calmly.

"It is a fine morning, Miss Allison."

"Yes."

Her manner was reasonably polite, but not in the least encouraging.

"Is it a fair sample of weather about here?"

"That I don't know; I do not live here."

"Indeed! Such is the case with me."

Her gaze was suddenly turned upon him, and she looked more gracious, as though she had heard a recommendation in his favor.

"I was not aware of that. Pray, where is your home?"

"In Pennsylvania."

Her face lost the last shadow of coldness, and Allan saw that without any effort on his part he had said just the words to impress her favorably. So she, too, had a prejudice against the locality—that is, she appeared to have. Possibly it had been against him personally.

He took courage and saw to it that conversation did not flag, and she answered readily on most points. Now and then, however, there was a shadow of reserve which showed that all was not plain sailing. In fact, Miss Allison puzzled him in more than one way. She did not seem at all inclined to give information in regard to herself, and his slight, polite efforts to learn something about her were thwarted in such a way that he could not understand them.

Wherever she came from, she was an intelligent, refined, graceful and pleasing woman, and he felt sure she must be of good family. At times, too, though her manners were irreproachable, he saw signs that she was one accustomed to command and receive obedience.

Probably the daughter of an old family in some other part of Kentucky, he thought.

He had begun by admiring her, and every moment increased the spell. In all his previous life he had not met a woman who interested him as did Carlotta Allison, and he began to lament the fate which would soon part them forever.

Mr. Reynolds was busy for a long time over his papers, a fact that pleased Allan, but, plainly, had the contrary effect on Carlotta, and when the lawyer finally laid his pen aside she turned from the younger man unceremoniously.

"Well, sir," she said, with an imperious ring in her voice, "are you through with your important business?"

Her emphasis on that one word was not to be mistaken—it showed that she was angry—but the lawyer answered with perfect calmness:

"I am quite at your service, Miss Allison. By the way, Allan, our business is private, but I will soon see you again."

The dismissal was not to be misunderstood, and Allan arose and left the office. He said

good-day to Miss Allison as he went, and his eyes spoke more than the commonplace words on his lips, but her reply, and the short nod of her head, expressed utter indifference.

He went out in a mood not exactly amiable.

"An imperious, scornful woman," he thought, "but, by my life, she is the most beautiful creature I ever saw. Who is she? What is she? I must question Reynolds when he comes home; I must know more of her. But why should I? She regards me with profound indifference, and I shall probably never see her again. Perhaps it is just as well. Such a woman can do a good deal for a man's weal or woe, and for me to be with her means—to love her!"

It was not the decision of a weak, easily impressed person, for Allan Hamilton had never been a ladies' man; but he had met some one, at last, so utterly different from the average woman, and so charming, that he felt strongly impressed.

He went to the lawyer's house, sat down and tried to read a book. Perhaps he did read; he certainly turned a leaf now and then; but when he was through he could not have told a word that had been on those pages.

He heard Reynolds come in shortly before the dinner-hour, which, in this household, was one o'clock, but paid no attention to it, and when the bell rung to summon him to the meal he went down indifferently.

When he entered the dining-room he suddenly paused. Carlotta Allison sat beside Reynolds at the table. It was a surprise which gave him a start, but he was not one to be long at a loss how to act. He started forward again and took his place, making an appropriate remark.

"I did not know," said the lawyer, after a pause, "when I introduced Miss Allison to you, that she was to become an inmate of my house, but I have persuaded her to stop here a few days."

Allan was delighted, and he felt that his face must have expressed as much, but Carlotta did not look at him. Her expression, too, was rather forbidding, but he was not to be deterred from expressing pleasure.

Miss Allison answered gracefully, but under all was a vein of coldness he could not fail to see.

Conversation did not flag at the table, and the fair guest did her part well, but at the end of the meal Allan knew no more about her than before.

She might be a Kentucky belle, a beggar or a queen—he had no clew to guide him. In any case she had the manners of a lady, cold though she might be.

She was formally introduced to the family, and there she remained for several days.

She seemed to have as much idle time as Allan, and they were a good deal together. He was lured on by the power she had first exercised over him—never by anything else, for she used not a solitary art of coquetry—and he sought her company persistently.

He was not rebuffed, and they rode and walked together every day. She was a woman in whose company time could never drag, and their conversations seemed to him something which made the world a new world.

In a word, the charm which had begun at the first interview deepened daily until it grew to deep love on his part; he became an absolute captive.

Despite this, he was as much in the dark as ever; he knew no more about Carlotta's past than ever. Who she really was, and where she belonged, was a mystery he had not penetrated. At times he tried to learn by throwing out indirect remarks, but all in vain. She told nothing.

Mr. Reynolds he had questioned directly, but without effect.

Carlotta was a pleasant, a charming companion. Her beauty was not her only attractive point. Her manners and intelligence matched her beauty well. During all, however, there was the vein of reserve, almost coldness, which had at first attracted his attention, and he was unbiased enough to admit that he had not seen a sign to prove that his love was reciprocated.

As a result there was little in his moments of meditation to encourage or please him, but he was always happy in the light of her radiant smile.

At the end of a week no light had been thrown upon the death of Nat Wixon. The sheriff had made an investigation, but Allan suspected that it was graded to the unfortunate lad's rank in life. His murderers had not been discovered, nor their motive explained, nor any light thrown upon the identity of "Girdrock."

The apathy shown by all who ought to have been zealous disgusted Allan, but Reynolds coldly advised him to hold his peace, and he did so to a certain extent. To Carlotta he freed his mind on the subject, and she emphatically echoed his views.

Finally Allan made a decision. He had often heard of an old hunter named Zeke Imrod, who lived in the very wood where Nat Wixon had been slain, and who was reputed an expert in matters of the trail, and he determined to visit him.

Accordingly, one afternoon he set out to find

Zeke's cabin, and after some search arrived at what he believed to be that edifice. A door blocked the entrance, and Allan applied his knuckles and waited for an answer to his summons. He little knew what danger he was tempting.

CHAPTER III.

DANGEROUS COMPANIONS.

HAMILTON was obliged to knock a second time before he received any answer, and the delay had led him to believe that the occupant of the cabin was out, when the door suddenly opened. Before him stood a tall, cadaverous, but muscular man, who was yawning as though just aroused from sleep.

"Good-afternoon," said Allan, promptly. "I am sorry to have disturbed you, unless you are the man I seek. I am looking for Zeke Imrod, the hunter."

"I'm him," was the terse reply, while the man sharply surveyed his visitor from under his bushy eyebrows.

"Then I have business with you."

"What is it?"

The question was ungracious, but the young man was not to be discouraged so easily.

"With your permission, I will tell you inside."

"Kim in, then."

With this surly invitation Imrod turned and slouched back into the cabin. It was a miserable place, and one-half the space had no floor except the ground, but seemed in keeping with the character of its tenant. Two blankets, suspended from a rope, curtained off a portion of the interior from Allan's view.

Both men found seats on rickety stools, and Zeke looked at his visitor with a gaze which indicated that he was analyzing him critically. Allan was not at all pleased, but he had come on business and would not leave without an effort.

"I have heard you spoken of as a skillful trailer, Mr. Imrod," he said, quietly.

Zeke only replied with a grunt.

"Possibly, too, you would like to make a dollar."

Again the nondescript answer.

"Am I right or not?" Allan added, with some sharpness.

"Right!"

"Is that all you have to say?"

"What d'ye want?"

Allan curbed his anger. It seemed utterly useless to try and make the man talk like other men, and he came to the point at once.

"You have, of course, heard of the murder of Nat Wixon, the stable boy?"

Imrod hesitated, and drawlingly answered in the affirmative.

"Well, all interest in the matter seems to have died out among the local officers, but not so with me. I am the man who found the murdered boy. I am the more interested in him because I see that the local apathy arises from the fact that the victim was poor, humble and weak-minded. Zeke Imrod, I want that boy's murderers punished!"

Allan had talked himself into considerable excitement, and his voice rung out sharply, aggressively.

Imrod still stared at him, and though that emaciated face was hard to read, his voice was as surly as ever as he replied:

"Why don't ye go ter ther sheriff?"

"Have I not told you he cares nothing about it?"

"Ay, so you did."

"That is why I am here. You are said to be a skillful trailer. Now, if you will take up the trail of the murderers at the point where the deed was done, and hunt them down, you shall be well paid. If you fail, I will pay you for your time; if you succeed, I will pay you even better."

Something like suspicion was expressed on Zeke's sallow face.

"Why be you so mighty int'rested?" he growled.

"I have told you once. I despise laws and officers which make a distinction between the rich and poor. I am Nat's friend because he had few others; I would be his avenger because no one else seems to care a picayune whether he lies avenged or not."

"Now ye talk boss-sense, stranger," Imrod replied. "Nobody does car. What was Nat Wixon? A mis'ble, half-witted critter. I advise ye ter let him alone, stranger."

"I don't require your advice," said Allan, hotly. "What I want is your aid as a trailer."

"You won't git it though."

"So you refuse?"

"Yes."

"And scorn my money?"

"I ain't goin' ter tramp my legs off fur Nat Wixon."

"You seem to be a fool, as well as without feeling, but if money is so abundant around here that you can afford to despise it, all well and good. I'll leave you to enjoy your wealth alone."

Allan cast a scornful glance around the miserable hovel and rose, but Imrod spoke again, and

in a voice more interested than ever before during the interview.

"Hol' on a bit, stranger. Jes' tell me yer real reason fur wantin' ter foller this up, an', mebbe, I kin help ye after all. Speak right out."

"I have already given my reason."

"Stuff! You don't keer fur Nat Wixon; you hev some other reason, an' I want to know afore ye leave my cabin."

Allan looked sharply at the speaker. There seemed to be a shade of menace in his voice, and in his coarse face. A sudden suspicion flashed upon the young man, and, not being the person to hide an idea through a motive of fear, he abruptly exclaimed:

"Perhaps your reluctance to help in the case arises from the fact that you already know all about Girdrock and his gang."

A half-startled look crossed Zeke's ugly face.

"What ther blazes do yer mean?" he growled.

"Just what I say. I came here at fault; I shall go away with the idea that you know more about the stable-boy's death than an honest man should."

"No, you won't!"

A new voice uttered the words, and the blankets were flung open and a third man appeared, while, close behind him, Allan saw several more—all rude, rough, lawless-looking fellows. He who stood at the front held a revolver, and it was raised and leveled at Allan.

"You won't go away with any idea," the speaker added, "for you won't go away. You'll stop here, as fresh youngsters like you are liable to stop at any time."

"What am I to infer from this?"

"Simply that a man who won't mind his own business is likely to get into trouble."

"I think I see. Are you Girdrock?"

"Since you are so anxious to know, I am!"

"And Nat Wixon's murderer?"

"Yours, you mean. Previous to this I've been a regular Sunday-school scholar, but I'm going to turn over a new leaf. Mister Man, I come from a section of the country where men don't stand on ceremony. That's my way, too. Fool! why need you meddle in this affair? You have sealed your own fate!"

Girdrock's voice had changed from a sneering inflection to quick, harsh tones, and Allan could not well doubt that he was in earnest, but the young man's coolness was something highly creditable.

"At any rate," he easily said, "I have accomplished the work undertaken by me—I have found Nat Wixon's murderers—"

"And your own."

"Don't be too sure of that."

"You are one; we are four. What are you going to do about it?"

"I propose to go home and inform the sheriff, and I will make it hot for whoever tries to stop me!"

"Rubbish! You make me disgusted. Why, I could thrash three like you alone, and here we are, four to one, and all hard fighters."

"I don't care if you are forty-four," Allan coolly replied. "It will not be well for you to molest me. I'll shoot the first man who tries it."

"Fool! what can you do? Don't you see that I have the drop on you? One touch of my finger sends you to Kingdom Come, and we don't stand on ceremony where I belong."

"Where is that?"

"Never mind."

"I would like to know why you killed Nat Wixon?"

"Who says we did kill him?" Girdock retorted.

"I do!"

"Well, you'll never spread that idea broadcast, for your meddling career is about over. You fool, why couldn't you be content to mind your own business? There are officers of law about here, and you might have left it to them, but no! you must make yourself officious, and run your mule-head into trouble. More fool, you! Men, advance and seize him!"

His followers started to obey, but Allan's voice rang out sharply:

"Stop! If any of you imagine I am to be bluffed or frightened, you are mistaken. On the contrary, I will make it hot for whoever molests me. Keep your distance!"

"Hold on!" said Zeke Imrod. "Let me show this gamecock what's what. I kin wipe up the ground with him, all alone. Let me at him!"

And he advanced upon Allan.

The latter had before this come to the conclusion that nothing but decisive action would save him. He knew that he had fallen upon the slayers of Nat Wixon, though he had no clew whatever to the motive of the deed, and it was plain that they would not dare to let him escape.

His first step would be to lodge information against them, and they knew it.

He was placed in a position of deadly danger, for his death was the price of their safety, and he must depend wholly on himself.

Imrod was plainly bent on mischief, and it would not do to delay.

Allan had remained standing near the stool he had just vacated, and a desire to avoid shedding blood, if possible, led him to begin operations on

a novel plan. Suddenly seizing the stool he launched it at the lank hunter like a flash, and Imrod measured his length on the floor.

The act was followed by an oath from Girdrock, and a bullet whistled past Allan's ears. Then the whole gang sprung at him in a body, like so many half-famished and furious tigers.

CHAPTER IV. PLAIN WORDS.

ALLAN was ready for the attack. He knew that he was dealing with villains who would promptly follow up victory with murder, and as it was life against life, he did not hesitate to resort to extreme measures.

Girdrock had missed his aim, and Allan took care not to let him have the second shot. His own revolver had been where he could readily get at it, and it was now drawn with a jerk.

He was none too soon. The men were upon him, and in each hand glittered a long, ugly knife. Allan thrust forward his revolver and pulled the trigger. There was a dull report and the foremost man stopped, reeled back, grasped blindly at his breast and fell to the floor.

By this time Allan's fighting blood was fully aroused and he went into the fight like a whirlwind. His first act had seemed to daze the nearest man, and his knife was unconsciously lowered. Allan leaped upon him, and with one blow of the revolver knocked him off his feet.

Two good deeds lay to his credit, but he knew that he could not long hope to fight these men successfully. Three of them yet remained, including Girdrock and Imrod, and the chief was pressing forward with a furious expression on his face.

The third man was between Allan and the door. The latter sprung at him, firing a second shot as he went, and his enemy reeled back out of the way.

Another moment and the young man shot through the door and darted away at full speed.

The fight had seemed wholly out of proportion with the numbers engaged, but it had been only another example of what one cool, resolute man can do when he moves rapidly. All had been done in a very brief space of time, and as there had been no system in the outlaws' attack, their very numbers had been a drag on their movements.

Girdrock, the only man who had drawn a revolver, had been unable to use it without shooting his allies.

The moment that Allan took to flight the situation changed. Three of the men remained fit for work and they bounded away in pursuit.

Girdrock had taken the lead at first, but Zeke Imrod's wood experience soon carried him to the front. He ran with surprising speed, unheeding the bushes, and using his long legs to good advantage.

Before Allan had gone a hundred yards he saw that the hunter was a dangerous pursuer; by the time that distance had been doubled he knew it was only a matter of time when Zeke would overtake him.

His own speed was lessened by the fact that he had to keep glancing back. Imrod bore his long rifle, and as he was probably a good shot there was constant danger that he might take a fancy to use it.

Chance favored Allan. He suddenly found his way intercepted by a sluggish stream—a place he well knew. It was a swampy region, with an abundance of water in stream, pool and lagoon.

Here, if anywhere, was his chance. He could swim remarkably well, and he at once conceived the idea of throwing his pursuers off the track.

This plan was no sooner formed than he took the first step. Plunging in, he at once dove and began swimming rapidly, but took a course just such as would not be expected. His reliance was on strategy now.

He kept on until air became necessary, and then rose in the cover of the bushes which fringed the bank and hung over the water. He had made considerable progress, but the course of the stream was so direct that he could look back and see his pursuers. Girdrock and the third man had just arrived at the south bank, but Imrod had crossed, and was excitedly searching the other side.

A smile appeared on Allan's face, and regaining his breath, he slid back into the water and swam on again as before. When he rose for the second time, no other human being was in sight.

His artifice had been wonderfully successful, but he was still some distance from the town, and it would not do to pause. Once more he took to the wood and pressed on rapidly.

By this time he was not only hopeful of outwitting his enemies, but of seeing them captured.

They were fairly thrown from the track, and, making the journey without seeing them again, he reached the village in safety. Going directly to Reynolds's office he enlisted the lawyer without effort, and he, in turn, got out Sheriff Huger and his men.

A party marched against the men of the wood, but with a result all expected. Nobody was

found. Imrod's cabin was deserted; but there were blood-stains on the floor which showed how well Allan had shot.

Huger was in his usual half-hearted mood, but Allan spurred him on, and the search was kept up briskly until dark. That settled it for the time, and all returned to the village, Allan, at least, being in a morose frame of mind.

It looked as though the gang would go free, even after this last outrage, and the young man was disgusted. In his wrath he determined to remain a day or two longer, and then, if there was nothing done, leave the place forever.

But Carlotta?

Recollection of her came swiftly, strongly. Could he go and leave her? He loved her as much as ever, but was as much as ever in the dark as to the state of her mind.

What of Carlotta?

When he reached the house the rest of the family had eaten, and he made a solitary repast. He did not see Miss Allison, and he asked for her. She had gone out for a walk. He believed that he knew where to find her, and went out himself at once.

The night was bright starlight, and, when he reached the grove which had been their favorite resort, he was not long in discovering her. She was seated where he had often read to her, and talked with her, alone and in silence.

He went forward and spoke, and she gave attention with unexpected animation.

"I have heard of your day's adventure, up to the time when you went out on your expedition," she abruptly said. "Pray, what was the result?"

"The same old story. Huger and his men are the equals, but not superiors, of blind men. We failed."

"Didn't you find the enemy?"

"No."

"What had become of them?"

"Oh! they were wise enough to hide."

"And you have learned nothing?"

"Absolutely nothing."

Carlotta was silent for a moment, and then she slowly said:

"Don't you think it singular?"

"Not particularly. There is a gang of outlaws in the wood. They are lawless, bold and cunning. Huger is just the reverse. That's the whole story."

"Have you any idea who and what these men are?"

"No. Nobody believes that they are moonshiners, and it is quite likely that they are mere marauders, who live by plunder, and do not hesitate at any dark crime."

"Do you think they will be brought to justice?"

"Frankly, no. I believe they will evade all pursuit. I am so strongly convinced of this that, unless the next few days bring a change for the better, I propose to shake the dust of this place from my feet, and leave here forever."

"Indeed?"

Allan was looking sharply at the girl, but the darkness hid her face, and he could gain no clew to her feelings by her voice or manner.

"Shall you then go home?" she added.

"I hardly know. What would you advise?"

"I am afraid I am poorly qualified to advise you."

"On the contrary, I should listen to your advice quicker than that of any other person."

"You don't know my failings."

"True; I do not. I have known you for over a week, and we have been much together, but I have thus far failed to see that you have a failing. I have so good an opinion of you that I doubt if you have any failings."

"Their name is legion."

Carlotta spoke almost curtly, but he did not heed her. He had determined to go ahead and have his fate settled, then and there, and he scarcely knew that she spoke. In quick, eager tones, he resumed:

"I must ask you to give me such advice; to be the judge of my destiny. Situated as affairs are it cannot, must not, be otherwise. It is for you to decide. Miss Allison, it might be said that I have known you only a short time, but it has been long enough so that I have learned to love you!"

There was an unmistakable start on her part, but Allan went on rapidly:

"I have been called a man not easily impressed, but, from the moment that I first saw you, I was your slave. To me, the hours I have spent in your company have been pleasant beyond description, and every day has added to the spell. I love you, Carlotta! I do not tonight ask you to bind yourself to me, for whether your answer is favorable or the reverse, time is necessary to test us both, and prove whether our sentiments are to be lasting. I use the plural number in a general way, not because I feel sure of your position; but you can see now what I meant by asking for your advice. Miss Allison, how shall it be—shall I leave this town never to see you again, or may I hope—hope to win your love, your hand, and walk with you along the path of our future lives?"

Twice while he spoke Carlotta had made a motion as though she would interrupt, but he

went on vehemently, eagerly, to the end, and then paused for her decision.

There was a long pause before she answered.

"Mr. Hamilton," she said, finally, in a low voice, "have I led you on in this matter by any act of my own?"

"None, save the charm of your presence, and this you could not control. You have used no unworthy arts."

"Have I given you reason to believe your love was reciprocated?"

"No."

"I am glad of that."

Allan started.

"Glad! Am I to infer from that—"

He paused, and she finished the sentence. Her voice was unsteady, and it was plain that she was deeply pained by the situation.

"I regret to say that I do not return your love—regret it, because I respect you, and would not willingly give you a moment's pain; you who have been kind to me. But, Mr. Hamilton, I have no love for you, and I may as well say so plainly. More than this, you may thank Heaven that it is so!"

Her voice faltered, and it almost seemed that she would break into sobs, but Allan had no words ready, and she suddenly arose and added, in a firm, clear voice:

"Yes, Allan Hamilton, you who are, I believe, an honorable man, thank Heaven gratefully that you are not loved in return by Carlotta Allison!"

CHAPTER V.

SHROUDED IN MYSTERY.

THE last word died away with its bitter inflection, but Allan remained gazing at Carlotta in silence. He could see her face but indistinctly, but that there was genuine pain in her heart he felt sure, and she certainly could no longer be called a woman of ice.

When he could command his emotions he answered in a voice almost husky:

"You surely do yourself injustice now."

"Injustice!"

"Yes. Whether you care for me or not, I am sure you are a woman any man can love to his credit—"

"What do you know of me?" Carlotta curtly asked.

"Practically nothing, but—"

"You are fortunate. If you knew me you would—. But this is folly, Allan Hamilton, I thank you kindly for the honor you would have conferred upon me, but it is better for us both that we part forever."

"I am not so sure of that, but your word is my law. I would not wish for a reluctant wife, and though your feelings might change with time, I will accept your verdict and try to outweigh my disappointment."

He spoke bravely, and without bitterness, but Carlotta could not but see that his heart was heavy with sorrow. It was a deep disappointment, and, brave as he tried to be, his voice would tremble and betray what was in his heart.

"It is better so, and if you knew all you would not find it hard to conquer your love. Believe me, Mr. Hamilton, I am not the kind of woman you would wish for a wife. My life has been dark, checkered, even revengeful. I have had wrongs to right, and in the pursuit of justice I have left the path of refined womanhood. Perhaps I am not all bad, for the name of honor is sacred to me, but I am hard and revengeful. What would you say if I told you there was a price set upon my head?"

"For what? By whom?"

"Now you ask too much—and I have said too much. Forget it, and forget Carlotta Allison. Very soon we shall part forever. Think of me as seldom as possible, but, if you would think kindly—well, perhaps you would only do justice to an unfortunate woman."

Her voice trembled, and Allan, confused and wretched, cried out:

"You are in trouble; you are beset with dangers. What are they? Who are your enemies? Tell me, and I will aid you to the bitter, or happy, end, asking no reward."

"No!" was the prompt reply, and her voice was almost harsh. "Thank you for your offer, but I must decline it. Your friendship I prize, but you must forget me!"

Her voice rung out with that inflection of authority he had often noticed, as though she was one accustomed to having her commands obeyed, and he did not answer.

Carlotta suddenly extended her hand.

"I am going to the house now, and would rather go alone. Let us part here. Good-night!"

He had taken her hand, and he now received a slight pressure. Another moment and she was moving away toward the house. Allan took one step after her and then paused. He was in a state of uncertainty and did not fairly know his own mind.

Carlotta soon disappeared from view, and after the lapse of ten minutes he followed. He did not enter Reynolds's sitting-room, but went at once to his own room.

The first thought in the morning which cross-

ed his mind was of Carlotta, however. He had put the matter to the test, and she was lost to him. Bitter pain followed the recollection, but he had the mental strength to face the inevitable bravely, and he went down to breakfast with a calm face.

The meal was waiting for him—and for Carlotta. She had not yet appeared, something to the surprise of the family. A servant was now sent to call her, but the girl returned in a few minutes with the information that Miss Allison was not in her room.

Lawyer Reynolds abruptly rose, left the room and went up stairs. Allan sat still, but a presentiment that something was wrong was strong in his mind. Reynolds soon returned, but took his place at the table without a word.

"Well," said Allan, "did you find her?"

"No. In my opinion Miss Carlotta Allison has cut stick and run."

This declaration was made in tones as rough as the words, and Allan looked at the lawyer in surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that she has run away; taken French leave. Our business was done, and I am not in the least surprised that she should skip out suddenly. All her personal effects are gone; after breakfast we will look and see if any of our property is also gone."

Allan's face flushed.

"Do you charge her with being a thief, sir?"

"I have made no charge."

"You have intimated as much. Pray, is Miss Allison known to you—her lawyer—as a thief?"

"No."

Reynolds was curt and ungracious, but Allan suddenly conceived the suspicion that a good deal of it was put on to hide mental concern. Suddenly it occurred to him that though he had once asked Reynolds for information in regard to Carlotta, and in vain, he must know enough to clear away a good deal that was mysterious about her.

"Who, and what, is she?" he abruptly asked.

"You have seen her."

"True, but I know nothing. Where does she live? Who is she, anyhow?"

For the first time Reynolds faced his questioner, and his expression was anything but pleasant.

"Mr. Hamilton, the less you know about Carlotta Allison, the better it will be for you. What I know I must decline to tell for various reasons; what I suspect is not to her credit. She dared not leave us openly, so she has run away like a thief in the night."

"Sir," replied Allan, warmly, "I believe you insult an estimable woman."

"Bosh!"

"Furthermore, it is your duty to prove what you have asserted. Tell me what you know against her."

An angry reply seemed trembling on Reynolds's lips, but he choked it back and more calmly replied:

"Come to me this afternoon, and, if I think best, I will talk. For the present I cannot, will not, explain."

His voice was inexorable, and Allan let the subject drop. The young man was in a mood far from pleasant, however; he could not accept Reynolds's verdict and believe that Carlotta had left as alleged. If this was so, there was, indeed, far more in the matter than he knew.

Making his breakfast hastily, he then left the house. He had a vague hope that the girl might yet be near, and he walked to the grove where they had parted the previous evening. She was not there, and he sat down on the old, familiar seat, and gave himself up to meditation far from agreeable.

To the pain of losing Carlotta was now added the mystery of her disappearance, and the possibility that harm had come to her made his position almost unendurable. Despite Reynolds's practical view of the situation, Allan could not free himself from the fear that harm had come to her. There were evil-minded men about, and they seemed just as likely to molest her as those they had already paid attention to.

He was thinking thus when he saw a scrap of paper lying half concealed between the roots of a huge tree. He stepped forward and picked it up, seeing at a glance that it was an envelope.

He read the superscription at a glance.

"Miss Carlotta Allison, Hermit Hump, Wyoming Territory."

Nor was this all; the address was in Reynolds's hand, and the post-mark that of the town where the lawyer lived. The date was not three months old.

Allan's brows contracted in a thoughtful frown. He had found an item of evidence when he least expected it, unless appearances were very deceptive, he had Carlotta's place of residence at last.

The envelope was empty and he had no chance of learning more, even if he had wished, but he gladly welcomed his discovery as far as he had gone. All of Reynolds's reserve could not deprive him of this clew.

He was still turning the envelope thoughtfully about when footsteps sounded, and he looked up and saw a boy approaching. He was a young fellow Allan had been kind to, and was a sharp

and precocious lad. Just now he seemed somewhat excited.

"So she's gone," he said abruptly.

"Who is gone?" Allan asked, rather curtly.

"Miss Allison."

"Is she, really?"

"So the lawyer says, an' I've kin to tell you what I seen last night. I thought you'd like ter know."

Allan knew then that Jim had discovered his fancy for Carlotta, but he let it pass unheeded.

"What did you see?"

"Wal, I was out late in the evenin', an' I seen her go toward the house—I s'pect she had been this-a-way. An' I seen more; a man was followin' her."

"Ha! are you sure?"

Allan began to feel fresh alarm.

"I don't mean that it look spishous, fur he went open ernough, an' I thought he intended ter speak with her in a nat'r'l way. Mebbe he did, but now she's gone it set me a-thinkin', fur he was a stranger."

"Describe the man."

"Wal, 'twas dark an' I couldn't size him up dead-fine, but he had a long-tailed coat, an' big, wide pants, which flopped about his shanks ez he went; an' he had a big mustache which stuck out both sides o' his face like the horns o' a Texas steer."

Allan Hamilton gave a sudden start. The last part of the description, added to the first, seemed to conclusively settle the identity of the night prowler, and the young man grew sick at heart.

This person, who had been dogging Carlotta so suspiciously, was undoubtedly Girdrock!

CHAPTER VI.

THE SCARLET QUEEN.

NUMEROUS questions were asked by Allan, but the boy had told all that he knew. That he had seen Girdrock seemed certain, but he persisted that the man's manner had been the reverse of secretive, and, though he had been going in the same course as Carlotta, there was nothing to show that he really had been dogging her.

The only suspicious circumstance was the fact that he had been near the house, and that Carlotta was now missing.

When satisfied that the boy could tell no more, Allan left the grove and went at once to Reynolds's house. The lawyer was still there, and the young man accosted him excitedly.

"Sir, I believe Miss Allison has met with foul play."

"I don't," was the ready, calm reply.

"But I have evidence that Girdrock was skulking about here last night."

"Well, what do you infer from that?"

"That he has abducted her."

"Humph! Read that!"

Reynolds had taken a folded paper from his pocket, and Allan saw writing in Carlotta's familiar hand. This is what he read:

"MR. REYNOLDS:—When you read this I shall be miles away. I have decided to go home at once, and it is my fancy to go secretly, or, at least, to avoid any elaborate leave-taking. Let this explain my course. You will please remember me to Mrs. Reynolds and Mr. Hamilton, who have my good wishes.

CARLOTTA ALLISON."

As Allan looked up from this note, which he could not but believe genuine, the lawyer coldly said:

"I told you she had taken French leave."

"But, sir," cried the young man, "there is something about this which I do not understand."

"When you have become as old as I am, you will not expect to understand half that a woman does. They act without reason, and seldom know their own minds. That is all."

"This is no time for skeptical generalities. It is due to me that you explain more than I know, Mr. Reynolds. Who is Carlotta Allison? What is she? Where does she live?"

"I must decline to answer. When you two met I had a vague hope that you might fall in love and marry, which was why I invited her here. You know the result; she did not take to you. Such being the case, let us drop her from our minds as she has dropped from our sight."

"You decline to give me any information?"

"Frankly, I decline."

"But, sir, what proof have we that she has not fallen into Girdrock's hands? He was skulking around here last night—"

"Ease your mind on that score. I suspect that he was her best friend."

"Sir!"

"There, there; do not glare at me like that, for I know her better than you do. I do not say they were friends, but I strongly suspect it. Come, Hamilton, have common sense, and be guided by me. The woman was not worthy of you."

"Have you forgotten," said Allan, in an intense voice, "that you avowed, only a few seconds ago, that you had tried to make us marry? An honorable friend *you* are, to lure me on to a marriage with one like what you say she is. A fine piece of work, sir!"

The lawyer's face had flushed slightly, and his manner was embarrassed as he replied:

"I know her better than I did then."

"What do you know against her?"

"Once, and for all time, I decline to say."

"Why do you think Girdrock was her friend?"

"You question me in vain," was the impatient reply.

"Probably you will also refuse to tell where she lives?"

"I certainly do decline."

"For once I have the best of you," exclaimed the young man. "Having accidentally found an envelope addressed to her in your own writing, I have one clew. She lives at Hermit Hump, Wyoming Territory."

Reynolds looked annoyed, then angry, and with an impatient gesture he exclaimed:

"To perdition with her, and all her tribe! I am done with them. If you see fit to make a fool of yourself, and worship an evil woman, you can do so."

"That is for me to decide," answered Allan, curtly, "but, one thing I will tell you: I have long wished to make a tour of the country beyond the Mississippi, and I shall at once leave for Wyoming. Once there I shall find Hermit Hump and Miss Allison!"

It was a sudden, perverse idea, for, after being rejected by Carlotta, he would never have thought seriously of following her had it not been for the lawyer's opposition. That had been just the thing to render him obstinate, and his resolution, once made, was fixed.

"Do as you see fit," replied Reynolds, in a surly voice; "but, my word for it, if you go you will be sorry. You don't know what dangers you will meet, and I suspect you will not live to tell the particulars of your mad undertaking!"

Hermit Hump!

It was a wild part of the Territory of Wyoming, yet somehow a village had managed to start, live, even thrive to a certain degree, but nobody was sanguine enough to predict a great future for it.

It had a drawback.

Wyoming is not celebrated for nature-hidden treasures, and the "tenderfoot" who seeks the West to dig gold never thinks of the Territory; probably he never heard of gold being found there. Nevertheless, there was gold in the mountains which rose so grandly to the west of Hermit Hump, and the citizens of the latter place would have been sanguine as to their town's future had it not been for one thing, which will be mentioned anon.

The town took its name from one of the peaks which was directly west of them. Hermit Hump, somebody had named it, and the name not only stuck, but attached itself to the village which sprung up on the lower land.

A road connected the peak and the town, and on a rock beside this road a young man was reclining one afternoon, a month subsequent to the events of the last chapters.

This was Allan Hamilton, who had bloomed out into a genuine Western man, as far as appearances went, and carried a numerous list of weapons. He had, however, been but one day at Hermit Hump, and this was his first trip abroad.

He had left the village well behind, and gone close to the wild peak, at which he was now looking critically. Some persons might have termed it a double peak, or even regarded it as two distinct peaks, but the old name held and covered the whole ground.

Yet, when within a few hundred feet of the top, it broke up into a ridge, at either extremity of which rose a cone-like peak, with a rough, rocky, wooded valley beneath.

There was not a sign of life visible to his gaze as he looked up, but he never seemed to tire of gazing. He had heard that about the twin peaks which gave them deep interest, and on the northern one, in particular, his attention dwelt persistently.

"Shall I go on, or not?" he muttered. "It scarcely seems possible that Carlotta Eagle, the semi-outlaw queen, is the Carlotta that I knew; and yet, I would like to know. But I have due respect for the privacy of the Sable Circle, and nobody knows what might happen if I crossed the Death Line. Wonder if I could not see Bluff Burke Bruin, and enlist him in my favor?"

He looked up at the south peak, but there was nothing to encourage him. There was little to encourage one anywhere around Hermit Hump. The place had a general air of gloom and weirdness. The peak, with its cones, looked forbidding and cold, and men who had been in the gulches which crossed and recrossed the sides, said that they were dark and dismal.

Few of the villagers, however, had ever been there. A power stronger than their own had warned them off, and marked out a line distinguished by black posts, beyond which outsiders could not go.

A strange state of affairs existed at Hermit Hump.

Allan Hamilton was thinking of this when he heard the sound of wheels. Partially rising he looked over the bushes and saw a team coming along the road from the direction of the mountains.

In an instant he was all attention, and his gaze remained eagerly fixed on the vehicle. There was little to be seen; a man on the box guiding two horses, with a canvas-covered, heavy wagon behind.

It rapidly approached, and soon reached a point in the road not fifty feet distant. It was just abreast his resting-place when there was a crashing of the bushes and several men leaped into the road in front of it.

Their movements were prompt and systematic, and in a few seconds the traveler was at a standstill, with strong hands holding his horses. But he still kept his place as coolly as though he had not been ambushed and brought to a halt in a way disagreeable to a bold Western man.

"Halt!" cried a clear, ringing voice. "Stay where you are, sir, and don't dare to raise a hand against us!"

Allan turned his gaze quickly toward the speaker, whom he had not seen before. The voice had prepared him for what he saw. There sat Carlotta Allison on a beautiful white horse, but what a change had come to the girl!

Instead of her former conventional apparel she was now clad in a wild, picturesque costume, the most prominent features of which were a gaudy hat and a blanket which fell from her shoulders to her trim ankles, and this was scarlet with the exception of a little trimming of white, and, across the breast, a figure in white representing an eagle with half-spread wings.

A more wild and fanciful, yet beautiful, picture Allan had never seen, and two words fell from his lips.

"Queen Eagle!"

It was a startling change, but he had not yet seen all. Plainly, Carlotta was the leader of the rough men who had ambushed the wagon—they, like their queen, wore wild dresses and the totem of the eagle—but she now followed up her last remark by adding:

"Probably you know why we are here. You have gold-dust in your wagon, but you cannot keep it. When you return empty, tell Burke Bruin that the Eagles have his treasure!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE KING.

THE driver of the wagon looked doubtfully at the fair, but imperious, speaker.

"I hope you don't mean that, Queen Eagle," he said.

"Why not?"

"Surely, you won't break the treaty?"

"And why shouldn't I? Are the Bruins so scrupulous that I should consult *their* wishes? There are graves in the gulches, sir, where men of my band lie dead. Who killed them? Men of King Bruin's band!"

"And haven't the Eagles killed Bruins, now and then? It's an even thing, Queen Eagle, but, if you molest Bruin gold, you break the treaty and pave the way for future bloodshed. You, as a woman, ought not to do that."

"A fig for the treaty!" Carlotta contemptuously cried. "I am tired of dallying with Bluff Burke, and a new era begins now. You are carrying his gold to the town, but it will never get there. We want it, and we will have it. See to it that you don't resist, for we are six to your one."

"And you really mean to rob me?"

"I do, but, if it will be any satisfaction, I will say that the blow is not aimed at you, or at the Bruins in general, but at your leader. It is my first step toward humbling Burke Bruin to the dust."

The words had barely passed her lips when the front canvas of the wagon was dashed aside and a man sprung out to the box and, a moment later, towered there to his full height—a splendid specimen of manhood, being nearly six feet tall and admirably proportioned.

He was a young man, but his dark face was stern and cold, and his appearance was made more impressive by the fact that he was clad all in black, except that on his left breast was a figure in white of a bear upreared, as though in hostility.

Other men now leaped from the wagon at the same time he moved, until twice the number of Carlotta Eagle's followers stood ready to obey his slightest order.

But his gaze was upon the Scarlet Queen, and his voice sounded sharply:

"So, woman, you want to break your pledge, and turn robber, do yo? Well, I wish you joy of all the gold you steal; Burke Bruin is here to answer for himself!"

Carlotta's followers looked dazed and almost startled, but her own proud face betrayed no fear.

"You are as crafty as ever, Bluff Burke," she retorted, promptly, "but your eloquence is thrown away. You are not the man to preach honor, or show me my duty."

"What lessons I give are with shot and steel."

"The graves of my followers prove that."

"They prove that your followers were fools. Not one of them ever died at our hands north of the neutral valley."

"Who decoyed them across?"

"Nobody."

"The reply is very like King Bruin."

Allan Hamilton, who was watching the strange scene with rapt attention, thought that Bruin's dark face flushed, but the latter quickly replied:

"Woman-like, you are evading the main issue. Tell me if you really intend to rob the Bruins of their gold?"

"I did."

"I suspected that you would, and this is the result—a trap and a counter-trap. We are two to one, and you have lost the honor of being a thief—and the gold."

"Don't be too sure of that!" Carlotta retorted.

"What do you mean?"

"We still intend to take the gold."

"What! with your handful of men?"

"An Eagle is a match for two Bruins, any day. Am I not right, men?"

A shout arose from her followers, but it was not so confident as she might have wished.

"This is madness!" cried Bruin, sternly.

"We are the best judges of that."

The man in black hesitated for a moment, and then sprung to the ground.

"Queen Eagle, may I speak with you aside for a few moments?" he asked, in a milder voice.

Carlotta hesitated; then answered affirmatively. She dismounted and fearlessly followed Bruin, her scarlet robe almost touching the ground. Allan Hamilton gazed at her in blank wonder.

The course of the strange pair took them near him, and he saw with some satisfaction that their words must be audible to him, nor did he have a scruple against listening in such a case.

As they faced about he saw that though Carlotta's face was cold and stern, Bruin's had softened almost to kindness.

"Carlotta," he said, "I am sorry to see this new departure of yours."

"I thought the Bruins were hard fighters."

"So they are, but I do not want them to fight, least of all against you."

"Peace!" exclaimed Carlotta, stamping her foot. "Have you not learned that I am a woman who does not care to hear those gallant, treacherous speeches which slip so glibly from the tongues of men?"

"I was sincere. I am not paying you a compliment; I merely deplored the possibility that our clans would have trouble."

"You are wonderfully mild-tempered at once."

"Have I not always advocated peace?"

"Possibly."

"Well, I see no reason why we should have trouble now."

"I do!" Carlotta exclaimed. "I am tired of dallying with you, Burke Bruin. It is time that I struck for my rights, and began your punishment. No reason for trouble! I see reason enough, and I am resolved to avenge my wrongs. Man, if I had been of your own sex I should have shot you dead before now, for my wrongs have been enough to turn the kindest heart to stone."

"Stop! stop!" spoke Bruin, hurriedly. "You do not know what you say. Wait until my guilt is proven before you condemn me utterly."

"I have proof enough. You come of a race false as Judas, and I have not forgotten those over whose bosoms the sod is resting."

"Carlotta, I swear to you—"

"Stop! I will not hear you. Do not think to blind me at this late day. You are very soft and mild, and perhaps I ought to name you Tiger, instead of Barbarian; but though you fawn and grovel, tiger-like, you shall not secure your prey when your outward mood changes."

The bitter contempt of her words was not lost upon Bluff Burke. His face grew dark and stern, and his voice had lost its kindness as he suddenly said:

"You have been to see Reynolds."

"How do you know that?" Queen Eagle asked, in surprise.

"No matter; but this contemplated robbery is the result of your visit to him. He, skillful liar that I believe him to be, has worked well on your feelings, and you come back determined to break the treaty."

"Your last statement is true, anyway. Henceforth, it is to be war between us. And now I am done talking."

She turned and swept back to the trail like a genuine queen. As she reached it she looked sharply at her men and Burke's, as though estimating their relative strength, but a new aspect was now put on the case by the sudden arrival of three more men.

They were plainly of her band, and Allan Hamilton felt his heart harden toward her as he saw that one of their number was the notorious Girdrock!

Carlotta sprung back to the saddle and tightened the rein so fiercely that the white horse half-reared in air.

"Girdrock," cried the queen, "in yonder wagon is the gold of the Bruins. We want it, and we will fight for it. Do your part. Eagles, rally around your queen and follow where she leads. Now, forward!"

Bluff Bruin had sprung forward and taken his place at the head of his men, and at a gesture from him each one drew a weapon. A fight was inevitable. Forward surged the Eagles, and in a moment more the rival clans were engaged in a fierce contest.

Allan Hamilton sprang to his feet. From the moment that he saw Girdrock as one of Carlotta's men his sympathy had been against them, and he was now suddenly seized with a desire to mix in the fight. There was the murderer of Nat Nixon, the half-witted boy, and this might be the last chance to bring punishment to him.

Down from his perch leaped the young man, and in a moment more he was in the road.

He looked only for Girdrock, and was not long in seeing him. Revolver in hand he sprung toward the fellow, who was engaged with one of the Bruins.

The surge of battle separated the two, and Girdrock and Allan came face to face. The former held a long knife which was already red with blood, and, not noticing who Allan was, he darted at him, the weapon upraised for a fatal blow.

Allan did not waver in the least, and, anxious that the outlaw should know with whom he was dealing, he sent forth a clear shout:

"Vengeance for Nat Nixon and Old Kentuck!"

Girdrock started, wavered and stared at the speaker, and, as a flash of recognition passed over his face, his knife was unconsciously lowered. Allan's finger was on the trigger of his revolver, and he had the will to use it, but a surge of the strife separated them again.

Somebody else was ready to pay attention to the young man, however, and a big fellow with the totem of the Eagle leaped fiercely at him. Allan fired, and down went the murderous knife and the man's right arm at one and the same time.

Scarcely had this been done, however, when a sharp pain shot through Allan's side, and he realized that he had received a severe wound. He wheeled and saw a knife uplifted for a second blow. There was no time for hesitation—once more he fired, and the man reeled back and disappeared in the crowd.

The fight was progressing noisily, for the members of the rival clans seemed to have a distinct battle-cry, and they were using their voices as well as their weapons. Bruins and Eagles were mixed in one confused mass, and to Allan's eyes it looked as though one, if not both, would be exterminated.

He, however, was out of the fight. Badly wounded, he felt himself growing faint, and he reeled and fell to the ground.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BRUINS AT HOME.

A SHRILL whistle sounded on the air, and its effect was magical. As one man the Eagles faded away, and the Bruins remained alone on the ground. Their enemies were in retreat, and as their horses had been kept ready, their flight was made with almost marvelous celerity.

One moment they were fighting; the next they were tearing madly up the trail, their queen at their head, her scarlet robe fluttering behind her, and her white horse covering ground so rapidly that she had to hold him back.

The Bruins had the will to follow, but a word from their leader kept them where they were. He was bleeding from a slight wound in the scalp, but he brushed the blood aside and gave it no further attention.

Fiercely as the battle had waged for awhile, not a Bruin or Eagle had fallen. Some of the former had ugly wounds, and a few of the Eagles had only left the place with aid from their fellows, but there were no dead.

Indeed, the only fallen man was Allan Hamilton.

Burke Bruin promptly advanced to his side and raised his head.

"Bring the liquor from the wagon," he tersely directed, "and you, Jones Bruin, see to his wound, wherever it is."

"Why, this is a stranger!" exclaimed Jones.

"Yes, but he fought manfully for us. I had my eye on him, and, whatever his motive, he did good service. Regard him as one of us, for, until I know something against him, he is my friend."

There was an instant flurry, and all possible attention was paid unconscious man. His wound, when uncovered, proved to be far from dangerous—providing he had proper care—but it was one that demanded both care and time. Blood was still flowing, but Jones stanchéd it and dressed the cut with considerable skill.

While this was being done Bluff Bruin meditated. His wagon, after all, did not contain any gold, and he intended to turn back to Hermit Hump proper. But was the young stranger to go to the village?

Allan soon recovered, and when Bruin learned that he was a new-comer in the vicinity he seemed at once impressed.

"Young man," he said, bluntly, "I don't know you, nor why you are hereabouts, but you have sided with me in this affair, and I am not an ungrateful man, I hope. We are nearer my headquarters than the village; we have a doctor

there superior to any other man in Wyoming; and if you will go with us you shall receive the best of care. What say you?"

Not for a moment did Allan hesitate.

"I'll go," he replied.

"Do you know who I am?"

"You are Burke Bruin—known as Bluff Burke."

"Probably you have heard of us at the village."

"Yes."

"As outlaws?"

"Semi-outlaws, was the term used there."

Bruin smiled faintly.

"Thank them for that much," he said, grimly. "Well, you must talk no more, but we will put you in our wagon and give you as easy a journey as possible. You need have no fears about going inside the Sable Circle, for who goes there with my permission is safe—unless he ventures into the domains of Queen Eagle—and as my guest you are doubly safe."

"I have no fear on that score," Allan promptly replied.

He spoke the truth. Bruin might be a barbarian, and a semi-outlaw, but in his opinion that strong face was that of a man to be trusted.

The wagon was turned, and Allan carefully lifted to a couch of blankets within it, and then the Bruins began their return. The trail ascended as they went and the way grew rough, and at the end of half a mile they passed the "Death Line."

It was marked by a line of black stakes, and to those who took the mountain clans at their worst estimate, was a very significant feature of Hermit Hump.

Beyond this point their course was wild, weird and rocky, and they moved through dark gulches and along the brink of ugly precipices where timid drivers would not have dared to direct a team; then the way grew too rough for further progress in this way, and Allan was lifted from the wagon to a hastily-constructed litter and the band went on.

Up the mountain they toiled until the base of the south cone was reached, and there they entered a spacious cave. Allan was borne to an alcove, and placed on a comfortable bed, and then Bruin gave another order:

"Send Ben Ali here!"

It was a peculiar name for America, but everything about this strange band was peculiar. He who came, however, proved to be very different from the other Bruins. With a light, yet bold, step a man of almost gigantic stature entered the alcove, and one look at him was enough to settle his nationality in Allan's mind.

"An Arab!" he thought.

Beyond doubt he had judged correctly; the new-comer's general appearance, dress and face all went to prove as much. Although far from his native land he still wore the costume of his own people, and this, taken with his great stature, made him a very impressive figure to gaze upon.

His face was grave, strong and earnest, and Allan felt at once interested.

"Here is a chance for your skill, Ben Ali," said Bruin.

"A stranger?"

"Yes, but he has served me well—"

"Then I will serve him to the best of my ability."

The Arab spoke with almost perfect English, and his voice, though deep, was musical. He gave prompt attention to Allan's wound, handling it with the care and tact of womanly hands.

"Is it dangerous?" Allan asked.

"Not in the least," Ben Ali answered. "I give you one day in bed; three in doors; then you will be able to go and come as you wish, if you use care."

All this while he was busy and the wound was soon dressed. Bruin was unremitting in his attentions and a good repast was soon served the patient, with enough wine to keep up his strength.

Then he was left alone. In the old days in his Pennsylvania home—even during the Kentucky experience—he had not expected to ever be situated like this. There he was, in the heart of the Rocky Mountains, a guest in the cave of men who, if not outlaws, did not fall much short of it.

Just what to think of them he did not know; there had been a diversity of opinion at the village of Hermit Hump in regard to the rival clans.

The village existed by their grace, and as long as the rules of the mountaineers were obeyed, no one need fear them. On the contrary the village people had their trade, and once they combined and put to flight a band of Indians who were menacing the town.

No open robbery or petty thievery had ever been traced to the clans, yet they were in a measure lawless, and carried things with a high hand. There was gold in the rugged sides of the peak and the mountaineers had staked it in, and forbidden outsiders crossing the line under penalty of death.

The scattering gold-dust of the lower gulches they were welcome to, but to the Sable Circle they must not come.

"I don't know what will come of all this," thought Allan, "but I am in for it. I suppose I am now a genuine outlaw, and I only hope my reputation will not spread. If I like Bluff Bruin I don't think I will be in a hurry to leave; I am near Carlotta and Girdrock, and I want to see both again."

This was true, but while he thirsted to avenge Nat Wixon's death upon Girdrock, his feelings toward Carlotta were of very different nature. His last sight of her had been under circumstances almost revolting to one so honorable as he, and he told himself that she was a woman worthy only of scorn, but all this did not suffice to break the spell which was upon him.

That evening Bruin sat with him for an hour, but the Arab doctor had declared that absolute quiet was what the patient needed most, and he was soon left alone. Twice during the night, however, Ben Ali appeared and dressed the wound.

Morning found Allan doing very well, and, at his request, King Bruin came in, lighted his pipe, and sat down to help while away the hours. The wounded man wanted information, and he proceeded to get it. Bruin was not reluctant to explain about the clans, and in his blunt way he was very frank.

"The history of the Sable Circle and its two bands is simple," he said. "Who first discovered gold here I don't know, but, finally, quite a party of miners gathered here. I was one of them. Then came a quarrel over the claims, and we divided into two parties, one of which took the north cone, the other the south one."

"This division only made matters worse; quarrels were common, and bloodshed all too frequent; and there was danger that a free fight would ensue and almost totally destroy us. I was the first to suggest a treaty; that which was adopted and has since been our guide. I suggested that the desirable territory be equally divided, and that no man of either band should cross the neutral line into the other's territory, and the plan was adopted."

"Some romantic individual gave us our respective names of 'Bruins' and 'Eagles,' but they were dead letters, until somewhat later, when we learned that our rivals had a woman at their head as queen; and that they had not only formally adopted their general name, but had a totem worked on their garments, representing an eagle."

"My faction moved at once; we took the name of 'Bruins,' displaying our totem, and I was elected leader. Thus the rival clans came into existence."

"But the Sable Circle and the Death Line?" Allan questioned.

"Were created to keep interlopers away. We held a conference with our enemies and decided that, as discoverers of gold in this vicinity, we had a right to it, and would hold it by might, if need be. Then we drove the black stakes around the peak in an irregular circle, forming the 'Death Line,' and forbade any outsiders crossing that line under penalty of death. The inclosed space, as you are aware, is called the 'Sable Circle.'

"And would an interloper really be killed?"

One moment Bruin hesitated; then he grimly replied:

"He would!"

"Either by your men or the Eagles?"

"Yes. When it comes to protecting our domain, we are united. That is the sum and substance of our treaty; to keep interlopers out, and let each other alone. Queen Eagle, however, has to-day broken the treaty."

Bruin's face grew dark as he spoke.

"Who is this woman?" Allan asked.

"She calls herself Carlotta Eagle, taking as her surname the name of her band, as those of both clans do. To illustrate, if you were to join us your first name would be dropped and you would simply be Hamilton Bruin. If you joined her band, you would be Hamilton Eagle."

"I understand all this, but what I want is information in regard to Carlotta Eagle and her past. It seems strange to see a woman at the head of such a band. Who is she, and how did she attain her position?"

"They spoke of her to you at the village, didn't they?"

"Yes."

"Then you know all that I can tell."

Allan knew this was an evasion; the conversation he had overheard beside the trail proved that the rival leaders had known each other in the past.

"I would be glad to know more," he said, slowly.

"Perhaps Carlotta will tell you."

"But you will not?"

"Exactly."

Bruin had grown cold and stern, but his face suddenly cleared, and he kindly added:

"I speak for you own good, Hamilton. My advice is, keep away from Carlotta Eagle!"

turned long before, and he had taken daily trips through the Bruins' domain, and at last his wound was in such condition that Ben Ali removed all restrictions in regard to his conduct.

He still remained at the cave, and found life there far from unpleasant. The Bruins proved to be very different men from what he had thought them. The majority were rough and uneducated, but many were quite the reverse. Association with them never seemed disgraceful, for they were anything but outlaws.

They had strained a point when they bade outsiders keep away from the Sable Circle under penalty of death, but beyond that they seemed as honest as men average. This, no doubt, was in a measure due to Burke Bruin, who insisted on perfect honesty, and his irrevocable rule that any outrage on the village people, or non-obtrusive outsiders, should be punished with banishment from Hermit Hump.

His other rules, while never over-nice, were as strict as those of a law-abiding town.

And they obeyed well. Almost every man idolized the young leader, and it was easy to comply with his directions.

Allan had the freedom of the Bruin domain; a rare thing for an outsider, but Burke did not forget the service which had been done him; and his experience with the mountaineers would never fade from memory.

The north cone possessed a deep charm for Allan, and he spent many an hour sitting in some retired place and gazing that way. At times he saw men moving there, but not once did Queen Eagle appear. She dwelt in his mind as persistently as ever, however, and more than once he had gone as far as the neutral valley, which separated the domain of the rival clans, and only saved himself with an effort from crossing to Eagle territory.

One afternoon he took his rifle and wandered to the valley.

His object was not clear, and it was there that the few affrays between the rivals had taken place, but he did not heed the danger.

On the whole, he wished to meet one of the Eagles; he would like to question him about Carlotta.

The valley seemed deserted, and he sat down on a rock and looked up at the north cone. There was the home of the Eagles, but where was Carlotta? Should he never again see the beautiful Scarlet Queen? His mind went back to the old days in Kentucky, but they had faded away to dust and ashes.

He was thinking of this bitterly when the rattling of a stone brought his gaze nearer home. He looked, and then sat like one spell-bound.

Carlotta was there!

Yes, Queen Eagle was before him, not thirty yards away, but he had not yet been discovered. She was without the scarlet blanket she wore when he saw her on her white horse, but her garb was of the same color. It was a scarlet dress, lightly trimmed with white, with the figure of the eagle on her bosom. Cut with a blouse waist and short skirt, dainty, beaded moccasins were barely visible on her ankles, and she looked brilliant and beautiful as a dream of fairy-land.

She was still advancing, and Allan prepared to accost her, but some one was ahead of him. The bushes were parted, and a man who wore the totem of the Bruins came out. Then he and Carlotta paused. It was a mutual surprise, and neither spoke at once.

The Bruin was Ben Ali, and the strange costume of his native land seemed in good keeping with hers.

Allan saw with some surprise that Carlotta was more deeply moved than she had ever before been in his presence. She looked at the Arab with changing color and almost startled eyes, and then she suddenly started toward him.

"You, sir—what are you doing here?" she almost panted.

"This is the neutral valley," Ben Ali coldly replied.

"Who are you?"

"A Bruin. Sometimes I am called the spy of the clan."

Carlotta stamped her foot angrily on the ground.

"Answer me!" she cried, imperiously. "Your dress—your face! Are you—what are you?"

The Arab calmly folded his arms.

"I am Ben Ali Bruin."

Carlotta recoiled and grew deathly white.

"The name! the name!" she gasped.

Allan looked on in amazement. What was there about the tall son of the East to so move a woman he knew to be strong-minded beyond, far beyond, most of her sex?

Ben Ali's face was stern. Allan had heretofore seen him all gentleness and kindness, but he looked dark and forbidding now. What new mystery was this?

One moment the Scarlet Queen yielded to her emotions, and then she took a sudden step forward.

"Are you an Arab?"

"I am," was the curt reply.

"And named Ben Ali?"

"Ben Ali, hunter and guide."

"You are he—you are he!" Carlotta cried.

"I shall never forget the name while I live!"

CHAPTER IX.

A STRANGE SCENE IN THE NEUTRAL VALLEY.

THREE weeks passed away.

At the end of that time Allan Hamilton found himself as well as ever. His strength had re-

But you—what are you doing so far from the land of your birth?"

"I am a Bruin," was the reply.

"And friend of the barbarian?"

"I am Burke Bruin's friend," the spy calmly admitted.

"Do you know who he really is?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yes."

Calm and unmoved was the reply, but Carlotta's face suddenly flushed.

"So the traitor guide—the assassin—has sought his reward at the hands of King Bruin!"

"Child, you do not know what you say!" severely replied the Arab.

"Do not think me so ignorant; do not suppose me weak because I am a woman. I have the Eagle clan to do my bidding—here, on my bosom, is their totem—and I am Edmund Allison's daughter!"

"I know it well."

"You know it, and yet you dare face me!"

"Why not?"

"Had you not the brazen assurance of a demon, you would not ask the question—you, who murdered Edmund Allison!"

"Mad—mad!" Ben Ali muttered.

"You must not think that I am ignorant of all that occurred in that far land. I know the facts minutely; I know how my father, betrayed by you, and at the instigation of Gordon Bruce, died so far from home and kindred. I have known *all*, yet I never until this hour suspected that you were so near. I wonder that the air was not poisoned by your presence!"

The Arab's arms remained folded; he had not changed his position; and he would have seemed unmoved had not the arteries and muscles of his neck and face stood out like whip-cords, and a strange light gleamed in his eyes.

Yet, he was calm—very calm.

"You do not know what you say," he coldly answered, "and you may praise the God of your people that it is so. Pray Heaven that you may never know."

"What base calumny is in your mind?" asked Carlotta, shrinking back a little.

Ben Ali tapped his forehead with one finger.

"The truth is here," he replied; "the terrible truth!"

Carlotta shivered.

"What do you mean?"

"Do not ask me," the spy answered.

"It is a trick!" cried the girl, with a sudden return of spirit; "it is a cowardly device to blind me and save yourself, murderer that you are!"

Ben Ali suddenly strode toward the speaker. Her hand fell to a half-hidden revolver and, though she faced him boldly, it was plain that she anticipated trouble. He, however, merely grasped the wrist of her disengaged arm.

"Woman!" he exclaimed, his voice vehement at last, "are you so mad as to desire the truth from one who knows it? I was there, and I can tell the facts. Don't anger me to the point of telling."

His calmness was gone, and his huge form trembled like a wind-shaken leaf.

"Tell me if you will; I would hear your latest lie!" scornfully cried Queen Eagle.

"You shall hear the *truth!*" almost shouted the Arab, "and if you lose your reason, you have only your rash tongue to blame. Edmund Allison died in the desert a victim of his own base plot, struck down by the double turpitude of his own tool. The man he hired to kill Gordon Bruce was twice a traitor, and when he had killed Bruce he also killed your father. This is how Edmund Allison died—not as a martyr, but as a murderer!"

Carlotta had listened to this fierce speech with her face ashen pale, and she quivered as though with mortal pain, but when Ben Ali ceased she huskily gasped:

"It is false—false!"

"It is true as God is true."

"I will not believe it."

"Be that as it may, you now know the truth."

"The truth! I know that too well, and it shall not be driven from my memory by the foul falsehood you have told to save yourself."

The Arab folded his arms over his broad chest with all his old calmness.

"To save myself!" he coldly repeated. "Am I, then, a man who need fear?"

He looked then like a rock against which storms might beat in vain—a man who could defy any other of his kind who drew the breath of life. The question was timely and appropriate.

"I will not believe one word you say," Carlotta replied, in an intense voice. "The mere fact that you are near Burke Bruin, is enough to condemn you. Birds of a feather flock together, and he is a man to whom nothing can be too dishonorable for consideration."

"Mad, mad!" Ben Ali again muttered.

"Do you know what you have dared by coming to the Sable Circle?"

"Tell me," the Arab quietly said.

"My vengeance! Do you suppose I am at the head of the Eagle band merely to wear such paltry honors, and secure a little gold? No; I

am here with a far greater object—to avenge my murdered father! Let Burke Bruin beware, and take the same advice yourself. I will visit the sins of each upon his head when the proper time comes. Beware of Carlotta Eagle!"

She wheeled and walked rapidly away toward Eagle territory. Ben Ali remained like a statue, gazing after her, but, as she disappeared, he turned and went in the opposite direction.

Then Allan Hamilton sprung to the ground and hurried toward the north. Let the result be what it might he was resolved to have speech with the Scarlet Queen.

CHAPTER X.

THE PRISONER OF THE PIT.

THIS strange interview had surprised Allan not a little, but he forgot to wonder at it in his anxiety to secure speech with Carlotta. The old spell had not vanished, and he had a vague hope that something favorable would come of a talk with her.

She had gained a good start before Ben Ali's departure enabled Allan to follow, but there was still hope of overtaking her before she passed the limits of the neutral valley. Even if he did not, he intended to see her, if he had to boldly venture upon Eagle territory.

He was hurrying through the bushes, and giving scarcely a thought to his surroundings, when, suddenly, some heavy weight fell upon him and he was beaten to the ground.

Quickly he glanced up, and the first thing he saw was the totem of the Eagle on a broad breast; the second, the dark, sinister face of Girdrock.

He knew his danger then and began to struggle, but it was only a desperate hope. Three strong men had assailed him, and, beaten to the ground as he was, he had no chance to use his strength to advantage. He fought bravely, however, and his contortions baffled the Eagles for awhile; try as they might, they could not hold that squirming mass of flesh and muscle.

The result could not be doubted though, and as they brought system to their aid his downfall was made complete. Held by strong hands, Allan finally lay passive, and Girdrock thrust a revolver close to his face.

"Now, then, my beauty, you want to take it easy!" the ruffian exclaimed, ferociously. "Don't you dare yell, or I will blow your head off!"

"You had better not. We are in the neutral valley."

"Do you wear the totem of Eagle or Bruin?" sarcastically asked Girdrock.

"Never mind; I have as good right here as you."

"Do you suppose it will do you any good to pose as Bluff Bruin's friend!"

"I have not so stated, sir. And now a word to you, and see that you heed it. Let me up!"

"Not much!"

"You will regret it if you don't."

"Do tell! What will our little boy do?" sneered the ruffian.

"I'll make it hot for you."

"Will you? Now, look here, Mister Man, you can't scare me in the least. What! can a white-livered cub like you come from the nerveless East and teach a Rocky Mountain Eagle how to fear? Not much! Now, steady, and if you yell I'll blow your brains out. Boys, put on the strings!"

It would be folly to resist, for Allan was now pinned down securely, and he submitted while his hands were being bound. If he was taken to the Eagle cave he would not only have the desired chance to see Carlotta, but he relied on her to save him from injury.

He was next abruptly raised to his feet, and his face turned to the north.

"March!" ordered Girdrock.

Allan did not refuse to obey, and with a captor on each side, and Girdrock as a rear-guard, they hastened to Eagle territory. Girdrock seemed to breathe freer when the neutral valley was left behind. He had broken a strict rule of the clans in doing violence in the valley, and feared Bluff Bruin's vengeance, but, once more on Eagle limit, his swaggering confidence returned.

The Eagles lost little time, but marched their prisoner along the ridge and then up the rugged side of the north cave. Allan was seeing his wish to explore Queen Eagle's dominion fulfilled, but his way of entering it was far from being to his taste.

After a long climb they neared the top of the cave, and the Eagles paused and bandaged Allan's eyes. They evidently did not wish to have him learn their secrets. This done they went on, and a change of atmosphere soon showed that they were in the cave.

Girdrock and one of his men went aside and consulted for some time—a fact that gave Allan some uneasiness. He argued from that they did not intend to deliver him to their queen, and his vague fears of treachery received new life.

After a long time the men returned, and the prisoner was taken along in a winding, irregular course. Rock and earth were alternately

under his feet, but they seemed to remain all the time within the cave.

Finally they paused, and after an indistinct order from Girdrock, a rope was tied around the prisoner's waist.

"Now," said the leader, "you are to be lowered twenty feet into our safe-deposit vault. There is absolutely nothing for you to fear there, and if you will promise to go down quietly we will first release your hands, to add to your comfort when there. Do you agree? You've got to go, any way."

"Remove the bandage from my eyes, first. I want to see your vault."

Girdrock promptly tore off the scarf.

They were standing in a hole in the rocks, with walls of stone around, above and below, except that to one side was a dark pit.

"There's your place," said Girdrock, waving his torch.

"I can see no bottom."

The outlaw impatiently flung the torch into the pit. It fell twenty feet and, still blazing, showed a space about as many feet square. Allan's decision was at once made. If he went down there was a hope of escape; if he refused, they might murder him at once.

"I consent," he said, briefly.

"You are a sensible man."

"Wait a moment. How long am I to be kept here?"

"Until Queen Eagle wants you."

"Does she know I am here?"

"No."

"Shall you tell her at once?"

"Yes."

Girdrock answered readily, and, though the prisoner had no faith in his promise, he was obliged to let it go at that. If Carlotta was told the truth, he would undoubtedly secure the desired interview, and he felt sure that he would not be seriously harmed by her.

The memory of the old days ought to save him once, at least, and he could not believe her all bad.

"I am ready," he calmly added.

"Down with him, then."

The prisoner's feet were swung from the rock and he was slowly lowered. A few moments he swung in space, and then the bottom of the pit was reached. The rope was thrown after him. He looked up and saw Girdrock gazing down with an evil smile on his face.

"I want to say," the latter remarked, "that the quieter you keep here, the better it will be for you. There will be but one man within hearing of your voice, but as he is the sentinel, he may take a notion to drop around and put a bullet through you, if you make a row."

Allan could not well be unconscious of the sudden change in Girdrock's manner.

"I hope I shall not be kept here long," he replied.

"Probably you won't."

"What about food and water?"

"The queen will see to that."

"Will you tell her I want to see her at once?"

"Certainly."

Once more the smile swept over Girdrock's face, and the prisoner felt his doubts increase. If Girdrock had his way, Carlotta might never know of the captive so near her. Still, he must continue to submit to the inevitable, as he had done before—he had never had any choice in the matter—and trust to luck, Carlotta and his own efforts to get out of his fix.

He was so impressed by the half-concealed sarcasm of his enemy that he forgot to make any reply, and, with a mocking farewell from Girdrock, the trio disappeared. For a few moments Allan could see the reflection of their remaining torch, and then he was wholly alone.

His first step was to cast off the rope from his waist, and then he picked up the torch and swung it into a brighter blaze. He wished to lose no time before examining the pit.

The result was far from encouraging.

Nature and the hand of man had done their work well, and the pit was not only very solid, but the twenty-feet walls were perpendicular and smooth—not a chance there to find foothold if one tried to climb.

He had only one hope of escaping unaided, and this lay in the rope. If he could secure one end at the top of the pit he could easily ascend, so he made a noose and began the effort.

If luck would guide the rope, and the noose catch on some point of rock, all might yet be well.

Zealously he went about it, but time and again the noose slipped back into the pit when he tightened the rope. It would not catch. He was inclined to persevere, and did so until convinced that he was merely worrying himself over something perfectly useless. Then he sat down to meditate on the situation.

A grim smile suddenly came to his face.

"How often," he thought, "have I looked across the neutral valley to the land of the Eagles and wished I were here! Well, here I am, but I can't say that I am eager to remain. Practically no nearer Carlotta than ever, I am in a fix of the worst kind. If I read Girdrock aright he will not tell her of my presence, and he may at any moment return and murder me."

A long, dreary wait followed, and his torch

burned low and finally went out. It was like parting from a last friend, and, left in utter darkness, Allan began to feel miserable enough. When was this to end?

Still the hours rolled on, and he finally lay down and fell asleep. In one respect he was fortunate; he slept for hours, soundly, peacefully.

The awakening brought unpleasant realities. He was both hungry and thirsty. He had not eaten or drunk since the previous noon, and he judged that another day must have dawned. His situation had become painful and startling. Girdrock had not come back as Carlotta's agent, not in any other form, and a terrible possibility was thus suggested. Was the captive to be left to starve in the pit?

CHAPTER XI.

ILDAH.

ANOTHER long period of waiting followed—it seemed a full day to Allan, but was less than one-third that length of time. His thirst had grown to a point of acute suffering. Several times he had broken Girdrock's orders and shouted for help, but only the echoing rocks answered. No help came.

It now became his fixed opinion that he was left to die there of starvation, and his anger rose to a deadly rage as he thought of the cause of all his suffering.

Heedless of his waning strength he began striding back and forth across his prison, fretting like a caged tiger. He wished then that he had never seen Carlotta, but wishes were in vain. He was face to face with starvation and—

Hark! what sound was that?

Allan abruptly paused and listened. Some one was singing not far away, and the voice was that of a woman. Instantly his vanished hopes sprung into new life, and he sent forth several cries for help.

The singing ceased. Allan repeated his cries.

There was a brief delay, and then his gaze, upturned to catch the first sign, was gladdened by the sight of a human figure. His eyes had become so accustomed to the darkness that he could see quite clearly, and he easily made out that the new-comer was a woman—though he did not think it was Carlotta. Then a voice broke the momentary silence with the question:

"Who is there?"

"A starving man!" Allan hastily replied. "In Heaven's name, help me out."

"But who are you?"

"An honest man, decoyed here by a villain. He promised to leave me only a short time, but it has been days, I should say."

"Are you one of the Eagles?"

"No."

"Surely it is not the fault of Carlotta or Beckett Eagle, that you are left to suffer?"

"Carlotta had no part in it and Beckett Eagle I do not know. No; this is the work of a ruffian called Girdrock."

"Girdrock?"

"Yes. You know him, I see, but I am sure you do not approve of letting me starve. In Heaven's name, help me out and lead me to Queen Eagle at once."

There was a brief hesitation on the part of the unknown, and then she replied:

"I cannot release you until I have seen Beckett Eagle—Queen Carlotta is away—but one thing I can and will do; you shall have food and drink at once. Wait patiently; I will come back!"

She hurried away, and Allan tried to wait with the patience she had advised. Ten minutes passed and then she reappeared, and a basket was promptly lowered by means of a cord. Inside was an abundance of food and a can of water, and Allan first drank long from the latter and then attacked the food. It was not until his hunger was somewhat appeased that he thought again of his new friend. Then he looked up and saw her still standing on the verge of the upper ledge.

"You at least have not deserted me," he said, gratefully. "I am at a loss how to properly express my gratitude, but you have put new life in a famishing man. God bless you for it!"

"I am only too happy to undo Girdrock's wrong."

"You say that you know him. May I ask who you are?"

"My name is Ildah, and I am Beckett Eagle's daughter."

"You referred to him as one in authority. Is that so?"

"He is lieutenant of the Eagles."

"And the man who, in Carlotta's absence, will pass on my fate?"

"Yes, but he will not do you any wrong. My father is an honorable, just man."

"Then go to him at once, if you will—or will you help me out and let me accompany you?"

"I dare not do that. Even my father would blame me."

"Then say to him from me that I have been a guest, not a member of the Bruins; and that Girdrock kidnapped me in the neutral valley, brought me here and left me to starve. It was not of my own free will that I ventured on Eagle soil."

"I will tell him and bring him here as soon as possible. Wait patiently."

She flitted away and Allan was once more

alone. He resumed eating, thinking of the girl as he did so.

"I was not aware that this was a colony of women, as well as of men, but 'tis well for me that such is the fact. I owe a good deal to Beckett Eagle's daughter. Ildah! She has a name strange and romantic enough to match her wild mountain home, and she seems to have a good heart. I hope I shall find Lieutenant Beckett all that she pictured him."

His food had not wholly vanished when foot-steps sounded above and the gloom was broken by the light of a torch.

"Ho!" said a heavy voice, "are you ready to come out?"

"All ready," Allan quickly replied.

"Then fasten your rope around your waist and throw up the loose end."

Allan hastened to obey, exultant at the thought of getting out of the pit. However Beckett Eagle might use him, it would be a relief to leave this hole in the bosom of the earth. He was promptly raised by the united strength of the men, and then he glanced about to see by their general air who was the leader.

Then he started back; Girdrock was there!

"Sorry to have kept you in suspense so long," said that person, "but, you see, I have been very busy. Hope you have not been hungry."

His words and his manner indicated that he was ignorant of what Ildah Beckett had done, and it flashed upon Allan that Girdrock had not been sent, but had come of his own will, and that his original plot was still in force.

"Where is Beckett Eagle?" he asked to make sure.

"Don't know; I am going to take you to Queen Eagle now. Beckett is away. Hurry up, now!"

His whole statement bore the stamp of falsehood, and Allan saw that there was great danger that he would not see Beckett at all, but would remain in the power of his enemy. A sudden rage possessed the young man, and unarmed though he was, he sprung upon Girdrock and grasped him by the throat with both hands.

"You dog!" he hissed, "I will strangle you like the villain you are!"

Girdrock gasped and clutched wildly at the strong hands which seemed tearing his neck in two, but that tenacious hold defied him. His men, however, leaped upon Allan, and, after a brief struggle, he was torn away from his intended victim.

The villainous Eagle reeled, and then steadied himself against the rocks. He was deathly pale except where a few drops of red were gathering on his bruised neck, and he looked at Allan with almost unutterable rage.

"You demon!" he gasped, "I will have you torn limb from limb for this!"

"I've drawn first blood, anyhow!" said Allan, with a reckless, unnatural laugh.

"And I will draw every drop you have in your carcass. Ha! I thought only to kill you, but now it shall be torture. Men, bind him tightly."

This was soon done. Girdrock was caring for his injured neck, but he wasted no time when the prisoner was ready. The retreat from the place was begun with him at the head.

The only hope left for Allan was that they would run upon other men on their way.

The party pressed on for some time, but a change was at hand. They suddenly turned a point of rock, and then several other Eagles stood facing them, both detachments coming to an abrupt halt.

The foremost man of the new-comers was a powerfully built man of middle age, with a plain, rough face, but an air of honesty which at once impressed Allan. His frank face suddenly clouded as he looked at the other party.

"What does this mean, Girdrock Eagle?" he demanded.

"We—we have taken a prisoner, lieutenant," replied the ruffian, trying to speak nonchalantly, but stammering in spite of himself.

"Is this the man you had in the pit?"

Girdrock's face assumed a look of consternation.

"Yes," he faintly admitted.

"What be you doin' with him now?"

"Taking him to you, Beckett."

"You chose a direct route, didn't ye?" the big man asked, with evident sarcasm. "Come, Girdrock, you hev been playin' a rayther deep game, an' I'll see ye now in the main room. Foller me, all of ye!"

"One word," interrupted Allan. "Are you Beckett Eagle?"

"I be, sir."

"Then I ask protection from this man—"

"You an' he shall both hev justice."

The big lieutenant spoke somewhat curtly, but the frown on his face showed that he was seriously angry with Girdrock, and his manner was not to be wondered at. Allan now promptly followed his captors, and the whole party soon entered a large, high cave-chamber which reminded him of the Bruins' quarters.

There Beckett Eagle wheeled about.

"Now you kin explain," he said, addressing Girdrock.

"Well, lieutenant, you see it was like this: I

caught this fellow skulking around our cave last night at a late hour, and promptly captured him. I put him in the pit, and, I confess it with regret, forgot all about him until a short time ago. That is the story in a nutshell."

"And all a lie!" exclaimed Allan.

Beckett turned toward the speaker.

"Tell your side o' the story," he said.

"I will tell the truth, sir. This man and the fellows now with him *did* capture me, but not near your cave. I was in the neutral valley when they set upon me, and after that they brought me here. All this was done to gratify a private spite Girdrock has against me, and he plainly intended to keep me out of your sight and work his will. I suppose you received the message I sent you by Miss Beckett?"

"I did."

"Well, when Girdrock came, just after, he announced that he was going to kill me. You can size up the man by that."

CHAPTER XII.

THE EAGLES REBEL.

BECKETT EAGLE looked at Girdrock with a frown.

"Up ter your old tricks!" he exclaimed.

"It's all a plot to ruin me," declared Girdrock, fluently. "Will you believe this fellow, who must tell a good story to save his neck, rather than me? Here are Conroy and Bragg—ask them if I tell the truth."

The two men hastened to say that he did.

"So you see," added Girdrock, "it is a question of three of your old men against one stranger—this spy."

"Probability is on his side. Ef you had captured a prisoner, fair an' square, you never would 'a' forgot him. No; you shet him up thar, intendin' ter keep me ignorant of it, an' you would, only that my gal happened along an' heerd him yell. Why, you was sneakin' him out by the back way, fur some dark purpose, I dar' say, when I lit on ye. Your story won't pass, Girdrock."

"It's the truth," was the sullen reply.

"Do you s'pose you kin convince Queen Eagle?"

Girdrock winced. Before the Kentucky trip he had been considered by all, Carlotta included, as a sort of second lieutenant, and next to Beckett in rank, but Carlotta had returned very angry with him, and he had been "reduced to the ranks."

When she heard of this new break she would be very angry, and Girdrock knew it.

"Lieutenant Beckett, you're hard on a fellow," he said.

"I hope I'm just."

"You place an outsider ahead of an old man."

"Sart'in I do, ef he deserves it. Tain't this young chap's fault ef you captived him an' brought him over the line, an' I may ez wal say flatly that I b'lieve you did. I ain't goin' ter be judge, though; we'll wait till Queen Eagle comes back, an' let her settle it."

"But, Beckett, you're wronging me—"

"Come, don't say that ag'in; I've heerd enough. Young man," to Allan, "what's yer name?"

Allan answered promptly.

"A guest o' Bluff Bruin's, I hear," continued Beckett.

"Yes, though it was chance that placed me there. I am not an old friend of the Bruin chief; in fact, I never saw him until—recently."

"Wal, I ain't no admirer o' Bruin or his gang, but you're goin' ter hev justice hyar. All the restraint I shall put on you will be ter ask yer parole o' honor not ter run away, nor go beyond such a part o' the cave as I shall name."

"All this I solemnly promise," Allan replied, promptly.

"Then foller me."

Allan obeyed. As he glanced back the prospect did not look encouraging in that quarter. Girdrock's face bore an expression of rage and baffled hatred, and his tools seemed in a frame of mind equally vindictive. The affair had gone against them up to that time, but they had only conceived fresh hatred for him. Only the authority of the muscular lieutenant kept them under control, and if opportunity was offered, they would be sure to strike again.

Beckett led the way to a smaller cave-chamber, where Ildah was busy over some household duty in a place so home-like that one could hardly realize what sort of a home was hers.

She looked at them with some surprise, but her father did not keep her in doubt.

"Idy, girl," he said, "I've often thought you had the grit an' hard-heartedness nec'sary fur a jailer, an' now I'm goin' ter test ye. This young chap you saved from the pit is on his parole o' honor. I don't reckon he would break it, but I give him in your charge; so keep an eye on him. Is this right, stranger?"

"Perfectly right," Allan replied, and, indeed, it was an arrangement which pleased him greatly.

Plainly seen, Ildah proved to be a very pretty girl, and captivity lost its last vexation with her for a guard. She shot a glance at Beckett, which indicated that she was surprised at the arrangement, but said nothing against it. The lieutenant went out and they were left together, though

Allan could hear the voices of other women close at hand.

"Your father is a grim joker," he observed.

"How so?"

"I refer to what he said about your being fitted for the position of a jailer."

"He says a good many odd things."

"If my experience is a criterion, he is a man any one should be proud to know."

"Beckett Eagle is a perfect man, sir."

"I am surprised to find such a colony here. There are no women at the cave of the Bruins."

"Burke Bruin is said to be a woman-hater. We have five women here, besides Queen Carlotta."

Allan hesitated for a moment and looked at Ildah critically. Besides being pretty, she was refined, and had a composure of manner wonderful in one reared as she had been. It was purely natural—the result of real intelligence—and did not approach boldness.

"You know the queen well, I suppose?"

"Intimately, sir."

"May I ask your opinion of her?"

"She is the noblest of women."

"Pardon me, but are there not those who would stoutly deny this?"

"There are those who call us all mere outlaws," replied Ildah, with some spirit, "and, of course, such persons would not hesitate to speak ill of Carlotta; but, sir, she is a wronged, noble woman. She does not like her position here, and many a time I have seen her weep bitterly."

"Then why does she remain?"

"To be near Burke Bruin. He is her deadly enemy, and she is here to secure justice, by some means or other. I fear there are stormy times ahead, for only a few days ago there was an open fight between the Bruins and Eagles. It was a bitter experience for Carlotta, who was miserable when she reached home."

"But Bluff Bruin says her men began the fight," said Allan, doubtfully.

"So they did, but it was done in desperation. Carlotta has tried every other means, and now she sees that she must resort to desperate measures. But her nature cannot be hardened, and she cried as though her heart would break, after it was all over."

Allan looked at the pretty speaker wonderingly. There could be no doubt that she was sincere in making these statements, and they served to put Queen Eagle in a new light. He remembered Carlotta's charges against Bruin, as heard by him before the fight on the trail.

Could it be that Carlotta was really a deeply wronged woman, and that Burke Bruin was a scoundrel?

The supposition did not coincide with Allan's opinion of the Bruin king. Bluff and curt at times the latter certainly was, but it was hard to believe him a villain.

Ildah seemed anxious to convince her hearer, and she went on for some minutes, describing Carlotta's good qualities, of which kindness and womanly feeling seemed to be the main characteristics. She, at least, believed fully in the queen of the clan.

Their conversation was suddenly and ominously interrupted. Footsteps sounded near the entrance to the chamber, and Allan looked around and saw several of the Eagles, with Girdrock at their head. This fact was in itself significant, and when he marked the expression on their faces he saw trouble ahead. Every face bore a scowl, and Girdrock looked particularly malevolent and aggressive.

Ildah looked at the new-comers in a way which indicated that they had no right in that part of the cave, and seemed greatly surprised.

"Is Beckett Eagle here?" Girdrock asked.

"No, sir; he is not. May I ask to what we are indebted for the honor of this visit?"

"Most certainly you may, Miss Ildah. We have come for this man," and Girdrock waved his hand toward Allan.

"I don't believe my father ever sent you for him."

"We don't claim that he did; we are moving in this matter of our own will. The long and short of it is, Beckett Eagle has seen fit to side with this man against his own followers, and the boys have taken it up."

"Who commands here, Girdrock—you or me?"

The question was asked in a stern voice, and Beckett suddenly strode forward and stood facing the leader of the malcontents, his broad face flushed and angry. He understood the situation very well; Girdrock had used his powers of persuasion upon the men and actually set a rebellion afloat—something which had never before occurred in the history of the Eagles.

"You are supposed to command," replied Girdrock, boldly, "but when you abandon justice and common-sense, it is time to cry a halt. Who is this man you have fallen in love with, and placed ahead of your own faithful men? A spy, I say; and that ain't the worst of it. When we had our fight with the Bruins, on the wagon-trail, he sided against us and fought for them. At least two of our men were severely wounded by him, and one, Cheever Eagle, is likely to die. All this is due to this sneak, and the clan demand the right to punish him. Am I right, boys?"

"Yes!"

The Eagles shouted the answer unanimously and one voice added:

"Death ter ther sneak!"

"You see how it is," Girdrock added.

"I do see," replied Beckett, in a deep voice. "I see thar is mutiny afoot, an' I know the cause on't. All this is due ter you, Girdrock, an' ez you hev been so free wi' yer criticism I'll tell the lads why ye did it."

"I protest—"

"Protest, an' be hanged ter ye!" Beckett retorted. "One thing is blamed sart'in—ef you interrupt when I am speakin', I'll put a bullet through ye. I'm leader hyar when the queen is away, an' I'm goin' ter be obeyed. You hear me, don't ye, Girdrock Eagle?"

The stalwart lieutenant faced the mutineer boldly, and those who knew him best knew that his defiance was not assumed. He had the strength and courage of a grizzly bear, as it were, and no one man there would have dared to fight him.

Still, the malcontents were not convinced, and they handled their weapons nervously, as though eager to shed blood.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DECREE OF EXILE.

BOLD as was Beckett Eagle's stand, Ildah and Allan were ill at ease. The girl was very pale, and Allan, though prepared to fight desperately by the lieutenant's side, expected a fight in which the smaller party would be annihilated. Against such odds they would have no show.

"Men," continued Beckett, "I'll give ye a p'inter about Mister Girdrock. You all know he was a fav'rite after he saved Queen Eagle from the grizzly, an' was really second lieutenant until he went away a few weeks ago with the queen. He come back disgraced. Why? Wal, he hez never done his duty hyar—he has been obstinate, presumpt'ous, insolent an' it hez often been thought, he tried to git up a boom fur himself, an' lead the band in place o' Queen Eagle."

"That's a lie!" Girdrock interrupted.

"Repeat them words ter me ag'in, an' you are a dead man!" exclaimed Beckett, instantly.

Girdrock did not see fit to invite destruction, and, after a steady glance, the lieutenant resumed:

"While on this trip Girdrock did a vile murder, killin' a half-witted boy—"

"He crept upon us as a spy, and I put an end to him."

"Queen Carlotta was very angry, an', thinkin' that this, with what had gone before, made cause enough fur disciplinin' Girdrock, he was dropped ter the ranks. That's why he's stirred up this row."

"I deny it all," said Girdrock, with a swagger, confident enough with all the band at his back. "Even if it was true, what has it to do with the present case? Here is a man—Hamilton, or whatever his name is—who has nearly killed two of our best men. We want satisfaction."

"Yes, an' we're goin' ter have it, put in another man."

"The prisoner," said Beckett, emphatically, "will hev his case decided when the queen comes—not afore."

Girdrock turned to his fellow mutineers.

"How is it, men—shall we put up with this?"

"No!" the gang shouted.

"Just so. We demand this man, Beckett Eagle, and if you don't surrender him, we shall take him by force."

"You will, eh?"

"We will."

"What do you propose to do with him?"

"Hang him higher'n Haman!"

"Wal," said the sturdy lieutenant, "ef you want him, come an' take him!"

And he suddenly drew two revolvers, cocked them, and grimly faced the rebels. Allan moved promptly to his side, displaying a revolver which Ildah had secretly thrust into his hand.

"I am with you, Beckett," he said, firmly.

The Eagle lieutenant was watching the rebels sharply.

"You know me, lads," he added, "an' know ef any o' you buck ag'in' me in this, thar will be dead men fur somebody ter bury. I advise ye ter keep off."

Girdrock saw that this bold defiance had caused some uneasiness, and he once more addressed them:

"How is it, men? This hound of a Bruin has foully murdered two of our men. Shall we forgive him and take him to our bosoms, or shall we have revenge?"

"Revenge!" was the shout.

"And will you follow me?"

"Yes."

"Then come on!"

He drew his revolver with a jerk, and his example was freely followed. Another moment and there would have been bloodshed, but the projected rush was interrupted in a way that none of them expected. With a sweep like the movement of a caged tigress a new actor came upon the scene, and even Girdrock cowered back.

Carlotta Eagle stood between the hostile forces!

There was a lull—a silence which was both painful and ominous—but Carlotta was looking at the leader of the malcontents in a way which did not promise any good for him. Her face was flushed; her eyes sparkled angrily; and she had never looked more truly queen-like than when she confronted those brawny rebels.

Had the advantage of physical force been on her side she could not have been more resolute.

"Well," she said, at last, in a steady voice, "what are you doing here?"

There was no answer.

"Crafton Eagle, who invited you here?"

The man hesitated, and then muttered Girdrock's name.

"Had he a right to ask you here?"

"No."

"Then why did you come?"

Another hesitation, and then an uneasy reply:

"Ask him!"

She was directed to Girdrock, but she had known before where the blame lay. She had learned by repeated experience that Girdrock was a villain and traitor, and it was just like him to head a revolt. This time he had sinned past forgiveness.

"Girdrock Eagle," she said, sternly, "what have you to say in defense of yourself and these misguided men?"

"I have this to say: Yonder man is a spy, and the lives of two of our best men are going out like dying candles because of the wounds he inflicted. Only for him we should have won in the fight on the wagon-trail, but he fought for Burke Bruin, and is now here as Bruin's spy. I demand that this man be not forgiven and petted, but be dealt with as the murderer of our brave fellows should be."

There was a murmur among the men which told how well his words had been chosen.

"I will hear all the evidence in the case," Carlotta said, very calmly.

One by one Girdrock, Beckett, Ildah and Allan told their stories in detail. When they were done, the queen quietly added:

"I think I know whom to believe in this case. You, Mr. Hamilton, have casually alluded to seeing me in the neutral valley just before you claim to have been captured. Now, I saw Girdrock and his companions there when I was leaving, though he has sworn that he has not been in the neutral valley during the past week."

Girdrock's face fell perceptibly.

"Such being the case," resumed the queen, "I find him guilty, and shall punish him accordingly. His associates in kidnapping Mr. Hamilton can escape punishment by confessing their fault, and swearing loyalty in the future."

Girdrock looked warily at his companions, but he was not heeded. They saw that his days of power were gone; and, as rats desert a sinking craft, they deserted him. Both promptly confessed that their previous statements had been false, and that Girdrock had kidnapped Allan to gratify an old grudge.

By this time the tide of feeling had changed, and the disgraced man found himself without an ally.

One by one the men moved away from him, until he stood alone.

"Girdrock," continued the queen, "your day as an Eagle is past, and some punishment must be meted out to you. You may thank your stars that your ruler is not a man, for I believe almost any man would punish you with death. Such is not my intention. The decree is that you leave Hermit Hump forever, as soon as tomorrow morning, and that you forfeit your share of the gold we have dug as a band. You are an exile, and it is my order that if you are ever found in the Sable Circle after you once leave it, the first man to see you shall shoot you down!"

The banished man had grown pale with rage and consternation. It was bad enough to be robbed of his revenge on Allan Hamilton, but the forfeiture of his share of the Eagles' gold reduced him at one blow to beggary.

"This is an outrage!" he gasped, rather than exclaimed.

"What of your own conduct?"

"I did what was right in all cases."

"You did what was infamous. You deserved death for murdering the homeless, half-witted boy, in Kentucky, and now you conspire to kill Mr. Hamilton because he knew of your crime. Your life, as well as your money, would be forfeit if justice was done."

"But—"

"I will not listen, sir. This is not less than the fourth time I have been obliged to discipline you; I do not intend to give you another chance to do your evil work. I give you until sunrise to-morrow to leave us. You can take your rifle and other arms, but, beyond these, you go empty-handed. Let me hear no more from you, for I am not to be moved."

Carlotta then turned to Beckett Eagle, and added:

"Give him the freedom of the cave, lieutenant, but remember that his life is forfeit if he is found inside the Sable Circle after to-night. I leave Mr. Hamilton as your guest; pray use him well."

With these words she swept from the chamber. Allan wished to speak with her, but he felt that,

at such a crisis in the affairs of the Eagles, it would not be prudent to put himself forward too much; so he did not attempt to stop her or make any sign.

All eyes were fixed upon Girdrock, but he gave them little satisfaction. With pale face and lowered head he turned and went slowly from the apartment.

Beckett Eagle shook his head gravely.

"Thar's mishchief in that feller, jest the same ez that is in a miser'ble snake till he's dead. I'm goin' ter see that he don't work out his ends. He's lost all grip on the men fur the time bein', but he's cunnin', an' thar's no knowin' what he may contrive ter do."

And off went the speaker, leaving Ildah to once more entertain Allan. The latter no longer regarded himself as a prisoner, and believed that he could leave when he desired, but Carlotta's manner had indicated that she would speak with him later, and this was just what he wished.

Moreover, he was well satisfied with Ildah's company for a while—he liked her more and more, as he saw more of her.

At the end of an hour Beckett Eagle came in and sat down with a sigh of relief.

"He's gone," he announced.

"Girdrock?"

"Yes. He's packed off in haste, swearin' that he won't breathe the same air we do another night. Mighty lucky fur us—we git much purer oxygen an' hydrogen out on't."

"Then he's really left the Sable Circle?" said Ildah, her face brightening.

"Yes. I sent Allan Eagle ter keep an' eye on him till he had passed the black stakes, but I reckon he is satisfied ter git out fur good."

Despite this expressed opinion Beckett hesitated as he spoke, as though not at all certain that they had seen the last of the banished man and his evil scheming.

Allan passed the evening with Beckett and Ildah, but he looked in vain for Carlotta. She did not appear, and Beckett, though desirous of speaking with her, did not venture to intrude on her privacy. Those who knew her best loved her for her natural tender and womanly qualities, but when she yielded to anger and bitter grief, and shut herself up—as she sometimes did—nobody ventured to interrupt.

That night Allan slept on a comfortable bed. When he first lay down he devoted some time to meditating on the strange chance which made him an occupant of the house of the rival clans of the Sable Circle, in order, without any action on his part.

What would come next he did not know, but, falling asleep, he dreamed that time had seen the clans united, with Girdrock as leader, and that the latter had ordered him—Allan—to be hung on a tall tree near the neutral valley.

When he finally awoke fully he heard a stir outside which gave him the opinion that morning must have dawned, and he was yawning lazily when Beckett Eagle rushed into the niche where his bed was located.

"Up, man!" said the lieutenant, hoarsely. "Up, an' stir yerself ef you want ter repay what's been done fur ye!"

His manner startled the young man.

"Is anything wrong?" he quickly asked.

"Wrong! I should say so. The diabolical Girdrock has been back, an' he's got his revenge right quick. He's robbed the Eagle treasury, an' stole Queen Carlotta. That's what's wrong!"

Allan leaped from the couch.

"Great heavens! Beckett, is this possible?"

"True ez preachin'. The queen's gone, an' thar is a note from him sayin' he's kidnapped her. I hope he has, fur it might be worse—I only wish I knew he ain't killed the poor child!"

His distress was too deep to admit of doubt.

"Then there's only one thing to do, Beckett?"

"What's that?"

"Seek for him, and *her*—and revenge!"

"Oh! we'll do that, sure enough, but I ain't sure we will succeed. Read this note the durned snake left!"

Allan quickly took the soiled bit of paper, and glanced over the few lines written thereon. They were as follows:

"BECKETT EAGLE:—By the time you read this I shall either have been killed in a bold enterprise by you and the clan, or a good share of the Eagle gold will be mine, together with our charming queen, Carlotta. For some days I have been besought by a man—a stranger to all of you—to steal Queen Eagle, but as he was an old enemy and hated her bitterly, and I feared for her in his hands, I refused until she drove me out like a wolf. Now, I am going to deliver her to him, and gobble some of your gold, or die in trying." J. J. GIRDROCK."

"What do you think o' that?" cried Beckett. "Oh! fool that I was, why didn't I set a guard over the cave ter watch fur that brute? Blind fool, I never thought o' it, an' now Carlotta has gone to some unknown, terrible fate. But we'll hev revenge, bloody revenge!"

And the lieutenant rushed wildly from the chamber.

CHAPTER XIV.

BRUIN HEARS THE NEWS.

ALLAN made all haste to dress, and as he did so he revolved one question in his mind: Who

was the man who had "besought" Girdrock to steal Queen Eagle? He thought of Bluff Bruin, but, rejecting the idea as absurd, he decided that the man was probably a myth—a concoction of Girdrock's prolific brain.

As he went toward the main cave-chamber, however, he saw that active preparations for some move were being made, and he at once accosted Beckett again.

"This looks like going on the war-path."

"We're goin' onter it."

"In what way?"

The stalwart Eagle stretched out his hand toward the south—the home of the Bruins.

"I'm inclined ter give the devil his due, an' no more, but common sense requires that we make sure Carlotta ain't thar. King Bruin is her enemy, I know."

"I'll stake a good deal that he had no hand in stealing her," Allan earnestly replied.

"Time will prove."

"Shall you invade Bruin territory?"

"Can't tell. First o' all, I shall see Burke Bruin an' talk with him. I kin tell mighty quick whether he's lyin'."

"I believe he is too proud to lie."

"Stuff!"

Beckett spoke with curtness seldom seen in his manner, and then hurried away to perform some duty.

In a comparatively short time the men chosen by the lieutenant were ready. Beckett then approached Allan,

"Do you go with us?" he asked.

"Gladly."

"I have one, only one, promise ter ask o' you, an' I rely on yer honor ter keep it."

"What is that?"

"That you will not betray the secrets o' our cave, nor its a'proaches, ter any live person."

"I give my word of honor that I will not."

"Come on, then."

And Allan marched out side by side with Beckett at the head of the Eagles, and the descent of the cone was begun. Their course was toward the south, and Allan could not be blind to the fact that they were marching toward Bruin territory in force, and armed to the teeth. What would be the result? Would bloodshed follow, making the Sable Circle a dark place indeed?

Straight on they went, until the north side of the neutral valley was reached. There Beckett halted his men at a point where they would be distinctly visible, and, by his order, a rifle loaded without bullets was fired at regular intervals.

It was a signal to call the attention of the Bruins.

Before long it was clear that their course was to succeed. Men were seen reconnoitering on the other side, and a tall figure finally appeared which was recognized as that of Bluff Bruin. Beckett displayed a white flag—it was answered—and then a delegation from each party advanced to the tangled region of the valley.

They met midway. Bruin was accompanied by Ben Ali; Beckett had Jeffrey Eagle and Allan, but the latter was there as a neutral observer.

He at once advanced toward the Bruin chief, anxious to be received as a friend, but very much afraid that he could not convince Burke that he had not gone over to the Eagles; but the Bruin chief received him with grave cordiality, as one might say, which bore no outward sign of distrust.

"We thought you had left us," he said.

"I have been in trouble, King Bruin. I was captured by some of the Eagles, and only for Lieutenant Beckett's interference I should never have come back alive."

"Did you intrude on their domain?"

"No. But it is Beckett Eagle, not I, who is here to talk with you. I am only a looker-on."

He stepped aside, and the stalwart Eagle lieutenant advanced. He, Bruin and Ben Ali, made an impressive trio. The first two were six feet tall and broad in proportion, and the Arab was even larger. A trio of giants, with broad, strong, prepossessing faces.

"Burke Bruin," began Beckett, "you an' me hev been ag'in' each other, but I hev always thought you an honest man."

"If you have a favor to ask, explain it without circumlocution," Bruin steadily, calmly replied.

"I only ask a truthful answer ter a few questions."

"Ask them."

"Do you know whar Queen Eagle is?"

Bruin looked surprised, and then replied negatively.

"Have you taken any step ag'in' her, directly or indirectly, or do ye know o' any man who has, within the last two days?"

"Most emphatically, no!"

"I'm glad ter hear it."

"Why do you ask, Beckett Eagle?"

"Because thar is trouble up yonder, an' the Eagles is mournin' fur the loss o' their queen."

Burke Bruin made an unmistakable start.

"Impossible! That is—what do you mean? Can it be Carlotta Eagle has left you?"

"You shall hear."

Lieutenant Beckett was very favorably impressed with Bruin's manner, and he went on and told the whole story of Allan's capture, Girdrock's treachery, the revolt of the clan, Carlotta's return, her disappearance and Girdrock's letter. The Bruin king listened attentively, his gaze fixed steadily on the narrator's face, but, as he leaned his stalwart form upon his rifle, he stood like a statue. He might have been the most guilty, or the most innocent, of men, so far as his manner went to furnish a criterion.

When the story was told he spoke promptly:

"You have done right in coming to me first of all, and as this is a peculiar case I will do all in my power to assure you that your missing queen is not in the Bruins' cave. I give my word of honor that I have not proceeded against her in any way, and you may search our premises thoroughly—though, of course, your band cannot enter there. But you shall be convinced."

"Tain't nec'sary—your word is enough."

The manner of both men surprised Allan, who knew what bitter enemies they had been—as clan rivals, not for personal reasons—but he was very glad it was so.

"I'm now all at fault," said Beckett, after a pause.

"Shall I give you a hint?"

"I'd be right glad ter hev ye."

"Your queen is not kidnapped."

"No?"

"In my opinion, she is not. Man, are you blind? Can't you see that this is all a cunning trick of an artful woman?"

"What do you mean?" Beckett asked, his face darkening.

"Simply that you have been deluded by a plot formed by your queen and Girdrock together. Change your entire view of the case, and make them joint criminals, and you have the whole thing in small compass."

The Eagle's face had flushed, but he slowly said:

"Speak plain, Burke Bruin."

"You are very dull of comprehension. Know, then, that it is my opinion that Carlotta has deserted you; that she carefully planned the act, and, knowing that she could not take any great quantity of gold-dust away alone, she took Girdrock as a partner, and they worked up this little prefatory drama—this pretended quarrel—and carried out the scheme in a scientific way."

Beckett Eagle struck his broad hand forcibly on the barrel of his rifle.

"Sir," he exclaimed, "ef you was not an open inemy o' Queen Carlotta I wouldn't tamely hear sech words from your lips, fur you wrong her grossly, but it is ter be expected, I s'pose. I've only one word ter say: Ef you known the queen ez I know her, you would never hev sech an idee. Now let it rest."

"Will you search the Bruin cave, Mr. Beckett?" the barbarian king asked, in a less severe voice.

"No; your word is ernough, an' I will look elsewhere. I'm goin' ter hunt Girdrock down."

The speaker turned to Allan.

"I s'pose you stay with the Bruins?" he added.

Allan believed that the question conveyed Beckett's wish, and he replied affirmatively.

The lieutenant took from his pocket a square piece of cloth on which was worked the totem of Clan Eagle.

"I'm goin' ter trust you ez I would few men, but I b'lieve you are on the squar', an' you may yet be able ter help us in regard ter Carlotta. Ef you want ter come onter Eagle territory, wear this conspicuously an' no man will harm ye. I trust ye won't abuse my confidence in ye."

"I give my word of honor that I will not," Allan promptly answered, both surprised and pleased, as he received the totem.

Beckett turned back to King Bruin.

"I'm grateful to you fur yer courtesy," he said, with an assumption of stiff politeness, "an' now I'll go back ter our quarters. Some day you'll hear my signal ag'in, an' when I come, it will be ter prove ter you that ye wrong Queen Eagle with yer suspicions."

So saying he turned and strode away, and in a short time he was among his men and they were returning to their cave. Allan watched them with divided attention, but while his eyes were on them, his mind was with Burke Bruin and Ben Ali. He was not yet sure that he would be received on the old footing, and was correspondingly interested.

Ben Ali motioned Bruin aside, and they spoke in voices which, no doubt, they believed inaudible to him.

"Chief," said the Arab, "I believe that the Eagle spoke the truth, and that you were mistaken."

"Why so?"

"Last night, or, rather, in the dark hours of this morning, I was out on the trail which leads to the village. I heard a wagon approach, and stepped to the cover of the bushes to let it pass. It contained three men and a woman, and from words which I overheard, as well as from what I saw, I decided that the woman was a prisoner. I should have interfered, but the driver applied

the whip, and the horse struck a rapid pace, and they were whirled away. In my opinion the woman was the Eagle queen, and a captive."

There was a brief silence, and then Bruin's voice replied:

"If I knew this to be a fact, Ben Ali, I would at once summon all my men and go to the rescue!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE SWARTHY SPY'S REPORT.

KING BRUIN'S manner, as well as his words, surprised Allan. He was not one to become excited at any time, but he now spoke more like a friend than an enemy of the missing queen. He glanced at the two men. Burke was looking moodily at the ground, while Ben Ali was regarding his chief with a grave expression.

After a pause Burke spoke again.

"What do you make of this man who, Girdrock claims, hired him to steal Carlotta?"

"Nothing," the Arab replied.

"She has lately been to Kentucky to visit that villain of a lawyer, Reynolds, and she returned disappointed. Can it be that he is at the bottom of all this?"

"It seems to be a wild idea, and yet—"

"Well?"

"Let the matter rest until I investigate. If any stranger has been about here he must have stopped somewhere, and may even have been reckless enough to appear at the village. I will go at once and investigate."

"Good, Ben Ali! You are the man for the work, if any one is. The way in which you have visited the Eagle cave, without a soul there suspecting the fact, proves that you are pre-eminently gifted as a spy."

"Man can do all things save baffle death, if he tries," the Arab replied, with a sweeping gesture. "I have come thousands of miles to avenge a dark crime—to find a certain man. I should be a poor searcher if I did not use the gifts I have had given me to this end."

"Ben Ali, I sometimes despair of success in this, our great vendetta."

"Victory is not to the faint-hearted," was the deep-voiced reply. "Be strong, Burke Bruin! Remember the lone grave on the Eastern desert, and think and act like a man— But my words wrong you; there are few so brave and strong of mind as you. Let us go to the cave!"

He had broken off abruptly, and as he turned away Burke called to Allan. The Bruin's manner, though grave, was kind, and appearances indicated that he had lost no part of his faith in the young Pennsylvanian.

Ben Ali did not speak during the journey, but walked on with a stern, thoughtful expression on his swarthy face. Every hour in his presence increased his importance in Allan's estimation. The latter regarded the son of the East as a remarkable man. He had traveled far to avenge some wrong. What was it? Upon whom was his vengeance to fall? Allan would not have dared ask the question, but the silent, massive Arab was an object of ever-increasing wonder.

When the cave was reached Allan was informed that he could go at once to his old quarters, but Bruin stated that he had business, and went to his private room, accompanied by Ben Ali.

Half an hour later the latter left the cave again. Although Allan did not deem it prudent to say anything to Bruin, he understood that the Arab had gone to seek tidings of Carlotta, and he hoped for the best.

If the swarthy spy had been able to visit the Eagle Cave at will and escape detection, he ought to be shrewd enough to learn something concerning Carlotta and her abductors.

The cave had been lighted when he returned.

Allan was passing through one of the natural corridors of the place when he first saw the Arab. He had returned, found the chief, and the two were evidently hastening to Burke's private room. They did not see Allan, but he had a chance to note the face of both.

They were, in a general way, as impassive as ever, but their general air indicated that some discovery had been made.

Temptation now assailed Allan. By going near Bruin's room and listening, he could probably overhear all. It was not an honorable thing to do, but as he remembered that both men were openly-avowed enemies of the Scarlet Queen, his scruples vanished.

Fine sentiments of honor must not stand in the way of learning something definite about Carlotta.

Accordingly he quickly but carefully followed and was at a place to listen almost as soon as they reached Burke Bruin's room. The latter pushed a chair toward the Arab and bade him be seated, but Ben Ali continued to stand, and, folding his arms across his broad breast, he fixed an intense gaze upon Bluff Burke's face.

"You have news," said the latter, calmly.

"I have," the spy replied.

"Well, I am listening."

"I have been to the village, and have investigated. More, I have found enough to convince me that Girdrock told the truth in one respect."

"And that Carlotta was abducted?"

"At least, that Girdrock was approached by a strange man, just as he claimed."

"Who was this man?"

"A stranger who came to the village, lingered there, and seemed greatly interested in the Eagles—but not in the Bruins. He asked many questions concerning the Eagles—none about the Bruins. Chiefly, however, his questions were about Carlotta."

"Go on!"

"He was very anxious to see the queen, though, when it was suggested that he tie a note to one of the black stakes, requesting an interview, he quickly declared that he did not want to be seen by her."

"Suspicious!" muttered Bluff Bruin.

"You shall hear. The villagers believe that he haunted the staked line persistently—perhaps even crossed to the Sable Circle—and they grew to comment on his manner and his motive. Some believed him crazy; others said he was a detective; a third party advanced the idea that some relative of his had been killed by the Eagles, and he thirsted for revenge."

"Let us admit that there was such a man," interrupted Bruin, with a touch of impatience.

"Who was he?"

"Be patient and you shall soon know all. Finally, the stranger was seen in company with Girdrock Eagle, engaged in earnest conversation, and those who saw him—they were trustworthy people—observed to each other that they hoped he was satisfied at last."

"I am now inclined to take back the charge I made against the Scarlet Queen," said Burke. "She was undoubtedly abducted, and was not a party to the robbery of the Eagle treasury."

"Doubtless you are right. And now, who do you suppose this mysterious stranger was?"

Ben Ali drew his tall form erect as he asked the question, and his voice rung out impressively.

"Who was it?"

"Carl Rogerson!"

Burke Bruin bounded to his feet and stood facing the Arab, his face tremulous with sudden emotion. Ben Ali looked at him steadily, but did not volunteer to speak. Burke made a great effort to command himself, but his voice was hoarse as he finally asked:

"Are you sure?"

"I am," the spy promptly answered.

"Carl Rogerson here?"

"He is here no longer. He has accomplished his object and gone."

"Do you then infer that he came here to kidnap Carlotta?"

"Yes."

"But they should be friends."

A cold smile moved the Arab's face.

"Men like Rogerson are never to be depended upon as allies. Look at his past record! Engaged by Edmund Allison to murder Gordon Bruce, he played the traitor and struck down his employer at the same time. Treachery is a part of his nature, was, and always will be. It is not strange that he turned upon Carlotta; possibly he will hold her for ransom."

"And you are sure it was he?"

"The description was perfect, even to the scarred cheek."

"Strange that after all our search we should thus hear of him. He does not seem to have communicated with Peter Rogerson at all."

"Probably they long ago lost sight of each other."

"But we, at last, have trace of Carl."

"Ay!"

"Then our next step is plain—revenge!"

"Ay, revenge!" said the spy, in a terrible voice. "How strange is the working of fate! At last we have a clew, and it shall be followed to the bitter end. Ah! I have not waited all these years to lose my chance now. Revenge! Ay, we will have that—the dead shall have justice. Son of Gordon Bruce, my mind goes back vividly to that day under the tropical sun. I see the burning desert, with the sands stained red with the blood of a man I loved. Gods! how that pale, upturned face has haunted me—reproached me! There has not been an hour when the phantom voice did not cry for justice. And now my long search, my painful waiting, will be rewarded. At last! at last!"

The Arab's calmness had been thrown to the winds, and he was pacing the narrow chamber like a tiger. Back and forth as he talked he went with long strides, and his swarthy face was convulsed with emotion which awed and startled the listener at the entrance.

Allan had not deemed him capable of such emotion.

Burke Bruin was calmer, but he, too, was sufficiently moved to make his face stern and ominous.

"Have you any clew to the direction the kidnappers took?" he asked.

"None whatever, but we can find them."

"We must."

"Ay, and we will, if we ransack every foot of soil within two hundred—yes, a thousand—miles to do it."

"Enough—we start at break of day."

"I suppose it would be useless to move sooner. How many men shall you take?"

"Four ought to be enough, in addition to ourselves."

"Yes."

"Well, let us away to make preparations at once."

Allan quickly, but cautiously, beat a retreat. He had conceived a strong desire to make one of the party, and, though it would not do to let Bruin know what he had overheard, he intended to make a vigorous plea to be taken along. He seized the first opportunity to do this, and the result surprised as well as pleased him. After a moment's hesitation Burke replied that he could go.

Three men, named respectively Lorimer, Polk and Hagan, were added, and the party was complete.

They left the cave at break of day.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FUGITIVE FROM JUSTICE.

At one side of an oval-shaped valley stood a number of shanties in a group; indeed, four or five of them touched each other so as to practically be one. They were humble in the extreme, but all around was a scene of activity. Many cattle moved over the green fields of the valley, and the number of human beings was surprising—indeed, they seemed out of proportion to the employment furnished by the care of the cattle.

Around the shanties lounged men who were drinking, smoking and playing cards, and a close observer would have seen that all were rough-looking, even for a rough part of the West.

This was the home of a man who called himself Captain Burdick, and he was known to aspire to the title of "Cattle King."

In one sense of the word he was such, for he did a rushing business in that line, but his way and the law of the land were not one. Briefly, cattle-thief would have been a more appropriate term. He had collected around him a gang of men as reckless and lawless as himself, and they lived by stealing cattle from honest men, and selling them where they could.

Often he had been pursued after his forays by the victimized parties, but he had his dead-shot desperadoes to fight at his word, and, once in their own quarters, they were safe. The valley was among the foothills of the Rockies, and could be held by his large force against a far large party than the sparsely settled country about them could furnish.

Such, in brief, was Captain Burdick, his business and his home.

One day, as several of the cowboys were lounging around the shanties, as before described, they perceived two horsemen advancing at full speed. At first they supposed them to be of their own band, but, as they came nearer, it was seen that the foremost was a stranger, and that the second was in hot pursuit.

Instantly the cowboys were on the alert; such a race interested them, and it had another significance. Strangers were not wanted in the valley and they looked upon them with suspicion.

The pursuer was gaining, and, as they neared the shanties, he fired his revolver twice. The powder was wasted; the fugitive kept on gallantly so far as his own conduct was concerned. His horse, however, seemed pretty well exhausted.

Straight toward the group he came, but, fifty yards away, his horse fell, and he only saved himself by an agile leap. Then he fired once at his pursuer, wheeled and ran on toward the cowboys.

The latter were all on their feet, considerably excited, and thoroughly enjoying the scene. Nothing interested them more than a fight.

The fugitive turned at bay just before reaching them, his revolver ready for use, but the pursuer had pulled up and seemed to be in doubt as to the expediency of charging into such a crowd.

"Come on!" shouted the nearest stranger. "We'll settle this right here. Come on, and I'll give you all the fighting you want!"

But the man on horseback did not advance.

Instead, he tried his voice.

"Hallo, there!" he called, "who's the leader of this party?"

"We're all leaders," one of the cowboys promptly replied.

"I also trust you are law-abiding citizens."

A mocking laugh arose from the gang.

"You bet!"

"Then I call upon you to help arrest that desperado I have chased to your midst. He is a bank-robber, who has murdered a cashier, and I am a sheriff. I am here to arrest him for that crime."

"Why don't you do it?"

"Have I your promise of aid?"

"No!" thundered the cowboy. "You infernal sneak, we don't want no sheriff *here*, an' we don't help any o' the brood—except it be ter help 'em out o' the world. No; we won't help ye arrest this man; an' ef ye don't take yer carcass away from here, we'll fill ye up wi' lead!"

"But that man is a criminal and murderer—"

"Bully fur him! We vote his ticket all ther time. Ez fur you, take yerself out o' sight or you'll git winged. Ef ye ain't gone in thirty

seconds, I'll bore ye with a heavy-weight bullet. You hear me yell, don't ye?"

"But I—"

"No words—git!"

The speaker cocked his rifle and sprung a few feet in advance of his fellows, and the self-styled sheriff waited for no more. Wheeling his horse, he gave him the spur and went galloping away in what seemed a great panic, followed by the piercing yells of the cowboys.

Attention was then devoted to the man they had saved from the grasp of something they cordially hated—the law. He was a stoutly-built young fellow with black hair and a smoothly-shaven, dark face.

He at once addressed the cowboy spokesman.

"Sir, I don't know you from Adam, but from the way you have chipped in to save me, I'd be proud if I did. I take it you're cowboys. I've heard of your sort before, and all reports say you are *men* all through. Lowe you one—accept my thanks."

"So ther sheriff was goin' ter drop on ye?"

"Rather! I was out of ammunition, save one cartridge, and as he was armed to the teeth, I had to run for it. Say, give me a fresh revolver and I'll run him down, and have it out—No, I can't—my horse is played out."

"Better let them sneak go an' you stay hyar. You're welcome if you're ther right sort, an' I reckon you be. Did you kill ther cashier?"

"Gents," said the late fugitive, with a wink, "the sheriff said so, but sheriff's will lie."

"Ef he comes ter this valley ag'in, he'll lie under the sod. What's yer name?"

"John Springer."

"Whar bound?"

"Bound for anywhere, as long as I keep out of the hands of the sheriff. Fact is, gents—I may as well spit it right out—I'm wanted in Nebraska the worst way, and I must lay low for awhile. Speaking of laying low reminds me that if I had a bite to eat it would lay low in my stomach—fall clear to the bottom, kerslap!"

The free-and-easy manner of the fugitive had quite captivated the cowboys, and there was a general hustling to make him comfortable. Strangers were not wanted in the valley, but one who came with the recommendation of having murdered a cashier, certainly ought to be warmly received.

While Mr. Springer ate, the cowboys consulted. Captain Burdick was expected home every minute, and they knew he would be angry when he found a stranger among them.

Their consultation was to mark out their own course, and they decided to make a strong effort to influence Burdick in favor of Springer. The latter's jovial humor continued, and quite a circle of the men gathered to hear him talk while he ate.

He was barely done when Captain Burdick arrived—a tall, dark, thin man of at least fifty years, with a harsh, cold and cruel face, the beauty of which was not heightened by a scar on one cheek-bone.

Pollock, the cowboy spokesman, at once laid the fugitive's case before him. As usual, Burdick listened without a word or a change of expression to give clew to his thoughts. Pollock said that all the "boys" had taken a fancy to Mr. Springer, and they would like to invite him to join the band, if it was agreeable to their leader.

"Bring him here!" said Burdick, tersely.

Pollock promptly obeyed, and while escorting the late fugitive, managed to give him a few hints in regard to Captain Burdick's character. A good man, he represented their leader to be, if well handled; but peculiar, *very* peculiar, and a perfect tiger if angered.

Springer was set before him, and those cold, merciless eyes bore upon the stranger's face as though they would read every thought in his mind.

"Who are you?" he abruptly asked.

"Springer is my name, and I've had to do some lively springing of late. I'm all the way from Nebraska, and I came like a whirlwind. I had a horse and a sheriff to accelerate my movements."

"So you killed a man in Nebraska?"

"The sheriff says so, captain."

"And robbed a bank?"

"The cashier said so, but his remarks ended right there," answered Springer, with a broad smile.

"Now you want to join us, do you?"

"The boys have suggested it, adding that your word is the only law here. I think I'd like that; too much law is a vanity of life and a crucifixion of the flesh."

"Any man who joins us and then turns traitor, gets his fill of law. The penalty of treachery is death, and there can be no plots around here unknown to me. I can read the mind of one who contemplates treachery like a book, and when I find such a man—he dies!"

Hard and inexorable was the speaker's voice, and his cold, merciless eyes confirmed all he said.

"Captain, I'm not foul enough to try and cripple the bridge which carried me safe over when there's a blow. I've got to hide my diminished head for awhile, and if you see fit to take me in, I'll do my level best. I'm not a veteran

cattle, but I reckon I can learn. Anyhow, I can shoot a bit."

"So can I," said Burdick, grimly, "and I owe my expertness to practice at shooting traitors."

"You've done right, and you serve the country every time you wing a fool."

Burdick did not answer, but, for several seconds, he gazed straight at the fugitive, his cold, gray eyes never wavering in the least. It was a painful regard, but Springer bore it manfully. His air was as free from defiance as fear.

"You'll do!" said the captain, briefly. "He's one of us, Pollock, but this charge I give to you: Day and night for one week you are to be his constant companion, and I make you answerable for him. If you allow him to turn traitor, you, too, will be regarded as a traitor—and shot. Remember."

With these ominous words Burdick walked to the largest shanty and disappeared inside. Not once did he look around, but Pollock remained as cool as though his final speech had not been so significant.

"It's all right, pard, an' you're one o' us," said the cowboy, shaking the fugitive's hand.

"Whereat, I am pleased," said Springer, as much at ease as ever.

"An' you an' me are ter be pards?"

"Glad of that, but, see here, ain't the captain a bit hard on you, old man?"

"Oh! that's nothin',—we're used ter it hyar. He's all right ef a man is squar', but when a galoot goes wrong he will shoot him ez he would a wolf, ther cap'n will."

It was plain that the fugitive had struck company where no fooling was allowed.

He had taken a seat among his new companions, and he joked and laughed as loud as the rest, but, by chance or otherwise, he had secured a position where he could watch the large shanties—the closely grouped ones—and he glanced that way at irregular but frequent intervals.

His curiosity was well disguised, and none of the cowboys suspected what they might have seen had they been a few hundred per cent. wiser—that Springer was watching for some particular person.

CHAPTER XVII.

ENVIRONED BY PERIL.

SPRINGER seemed as much at home among his new associates as though he had known them for years, and few there were who were not favorably impressed by his jovial, happy-go-lucky manner.

As he sat among them and talked, his watch upon the shanties did not cease, but it was done in such a way that nobody else suspected that he was watching.

His perseverance was finally rewarded by the sight of a person one would not at first thought have expected to see in such rough company.

A woman, young, fair and refined—one who would have looked more in place in a drawing-room of the East—yet an inmate of the cowboy settlement.

Springer had made a slight start at sight of her, but in a moment more he was his old self, and his conversation had never been more light and easy. He talked to the cowboys, but watched the girl at the window.

Hers was not a happy face. She looked pale and sad, and it was evident that neither the group before her, nor the grand scenery of the mountains beyond, had any charm for her.

It was not long before she was discovered by the cowboys.

"Ther gal, pard!" said one, in a low voice.

A hush fell upon the group, and Springer saw that no one was paying attention to what he was saying. All eyes were on the fair face at the window.

"She looks more broke up than ever," observed one.

"Pale as a ghost," added another.

"I'm bettin' my pile that Burdick keeps her under ther influence o' a drug."

The last remark was made in a voice still lower than the others, and the speaker looked cautiously about before venturing to express his opinion.

"Ef he means ter marry her, why don't he do it? I don't understand what he's drivin' at."

"Why don't ye ask him, Eagan?" inquired Pollock, with grim facetiousness.

"An' git a lead pill through me? Not much, old man."

Pollock turned to Springer.

"You may as well understand it right away," he said. "Ther gal is a pris'ner brought hyar by Cap'n Burdick. Whar he got her I dunno, nur who she is, except that her name is Carlotta. Thar's somethin' in what Storms said about her bein' drugged, I do b'lieve. You'd nat'rally say, ter hear her talk, she was half-witted, but sech ain't ther case, I'm dead sure. Yes, she's prob'ly drugged, an' ef he ain't careful he'll ruin her upper story. She's wild at times now, an' makes cheap talk about havin' once been a queen."

"Do you suppose he intends to marry her?"

"That's just what sticks me. Ef not, what is he drivin' at. I'd like ter know."

"Is she satisfied here?"

"No, but what good does it do ter kick?"

Burdick is boss hyar, an' his word is law—nobody bucks ag'in' him. I s'pose she hez friends som'ers, but my advice ter them is—keep away from Burdick's domain. It'd be sure death fur one o' them to come hyar."

Springer's face bore a curious expression, but he kept up the conversation lightly.

"Does she ever try to run away?"

"Dunno. What good would it do? Thar are two women in thar who are ez much harder hearted than you or me as a rock is harder than a tomato-can, an' they hev been told by ther cap'n that their lives will pay for it ef they let ther gal get away. Then thar is always twenty o' ther band loungin' 'round hyar.—Git away? Ther gal might ez well give up all thought o' that."

"If she is so secure, why does he keep her under the influence of drugs?"

"Now, you hev me."

"Certainly, he can't want a foolish wife."

"I shouldn't."

Springer relapsed into silence. Perhaps he had taken an interest in the case of the female captive, "who had once been a queen," but if Pollock had suspected as much he would have warned him against it. The moment that the prisoner entered the valley she was dead to the rest of the world. There Burdick reigned supreme, and in the few cases where men had been so reckless as to dispute his sway—well, not far from the shanties there were six mounds. Above each rose a black cross, and over each cross dangled a rope, while in the topmost part of each was a bowie-knife, half buried in the wood.

These were the graves of those who had defied Burdick, and the ropes and knives were displayed to keep their fate fresh in the minds of those who remained in the band.

Guarded against internal treachery by the power of his merciless hand, Burdick seemed equally safe from outside attack while he had his wild band at his back. It would be a man bold to recklessness—madness—who would come there as an enemy, knowing the captain's way.

The girl at the window—Carlotta, she had been called—soon disappeared, but there was a lull in Springer's light talk. He had sunk into a meditative silence, during which he several times glanced at the mountains east of the valley.

It really seemed from his manner that he expected to see there something more than the beetling cliffs and green trees.

One of the cowboys finally approached him.

"Have you done anything ter offend Burdick?"

"I? Certainly not—not to my knowledge."

"Did you see him pass a bit ago?"

"No."

"He did, an' he stopped an' looked at you. You was lookin' at ther mountains, an' so didn't see him, I s'pose. Now, I don't want ter skeer you, but ther way Burdick looked at yer wasn't favor'ble. Ef I seen him look at me that way, I'd be a good bit skeery."

"Explain how the captain looked."

"Cold as an icicle, but with lips parted an' a peculiar twitching at ther corners o' ther mouth. Ef you ever see him that way look out. Maybe you ain't trod on his corns, but he looked at ye bad. Kinder look a little out!"

The speaker passed on and Springer was again left to himself. He glanced up at the mountains again and it is possible that he wished he was there himself.

He had come to the valley with more in his mind than he would have dared confess, and he knew that if Burdick learned the truth, his life would not be worth a straw. For a while he was seriously troubled, but, making an effort, he cast off his gloomy forebodings and determined to run his race boldly, though with prudence.

He arose and sauntered toward the shanty in which he had seen Carlotta. He felt that there was danger in this, for Burdick's cold eyes might be upon him, but he did not hesitate.

Reaching the window he looked inside and saw the girl seated in a rude chair in a hopeless attitude. For reasons well known to him the sight was like a violent blow. He had known her when red roses bloomed on her now pale cheeks. She looked like one almost done with life, and he could well believe that she had been reduced to this point by infamous treatment.

She was talking, and he sat down under the window, leaned against the wall and listened.

"Am I to be kept here until I die of inaction?" the captive peevishly asked.

"You ain't dead yet," a woman's voice replied, unfeelingly.

"I shall be if this continues. I can't bear to be kept indoors—I am not used to it. Oh! that I was back in the Sable Circle, with my old followers."

"So you're on that strain ag'in?"

"What strain?"

"You was a queen, was ye?"

"I was Queen of the Eagles!" the captive proudly replied.

"Ef you're an Eagle, why don't ye fly?"

"You don't understand. The Eagles were men, and I was their leader, but all this has passed away. It was years, many years ago; and I am nothing now. I am friendless!"

Springer set his teeth and his breath was drawn as though each respiration was an effort, but the unfeeling woman made some mocking reply. She had no pity for one of her own sex in trouble; she had fallen from the plane of womanly feeling, and the grizzly bear was of loftier nature than she.

At that moment a new voice sounded inside the building.

"How fares our captive queen to-day?"

It was Captain Burdick's voice, and the listener under the window strained every nerve to overhear all. He forgot himself in the interest of the moment; forgot that Burdick was liable at any moment to look from the window, and discover that the new recruit was there, in a very suspicious position.

Springer's life was in terrible peril then; the dark captain would ask no more proof than what was at hand to use his ever-ready revolver and make ready for another mound, knife surmounted, out beyond the buildings.

"You are come," said Carlotta, with a trace of eagerness. "I wanted to see you."

"Did you? I am flattered."

"I want to know what you have done to me that I feel so strangely. I am like one bound in an invisible web. There is a pressure on my head, my heart, my whole being. My arms and limbs are like lead, and my head is dull, heavy and torpid. What evil spell have you wrought?"

Burdick laughed in a disagreeable, hard way.

"Be content with what you know, for much learning may make you mad, and I don't want to talk with a foolish girl. Dwandel, it is you with whom I would speak. I have brought more medicine for this puny girl, and I hope when she has taken it, she will arouse and mope no longer. I am tired of her waxen face and babyish ways."

Springer ventured a secret look into the room and saw Burdick holding a small package in his hand, but at that moment Carlotta arose and took several steps toward him. Her pale face had suddenly flushed, and there was a trace of old-time fire in her eyes.

"Sir," she exclaimed, "I refuse to take more of your drug!"

A cold smile appeared on the captain's face.

"You do, eh?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"And why?"

"Because I believe it is that which is slowly taking my life away—which is binding me in these leaden chains."

"Wonderfully acute, you are!" sneered Burdick.

"I refuse to take more."

"Young woman," was the pitiless reply, "my will, not yours, is absolute here. You will do precisely what I say. You *will* take the drug!"

"And I say that I will not!" cried Carlotta, imperiously.

"How will you prevent it?"

"I will dash the drug aside when it is put to my lips—I will strike down whoever offers it. If necessary, I will strike *you* down!"

Her bold defiance thrilled Springer, who could scarcely control the impulse to leap into the room and take his place beside her, to oppose Burdick, but the latter laughed in a short, harsh, inexorable way.

"Dream your brief dream of power, for that is all it will amount to. You will obey me or—die!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

DANGERS THICKEN.

CARLOTTA was panting like one who has made violent exertion, her hand was pressed over her heart, and her whole frame quivered painfully.

"Who are you who dares to dictate to me?" she gasped. "Base wretch, do you know I was once a *queen*? Ay, that was my rank, but I am lost—lost! The light has gone out, and I am only a weak, miserable, friendless creature!"

Her voice had almost failed her, and she dropped into a chair, sobbing and wringing her hands.

Springer's hand fell to his revolver, and his face was full of concentrated fury, but once more he made a great effort, and controlled himself. Captain Burdick heard the outburst with his usual unfeeling smile, and then turned and placed the package on a shelf.

"Attend to this," he said. "You need have no fear about the girl refusing—this was but a brief return of reason. If she does refuse, send for me."

And then he left the room.

The woman he had addressed by so peculiar a name, Dwandel, then advanced to Carlotta, and shook her roughly.

"You whimpering fool!" she exclaimed, "I have had enough of this. Stop it! Stay!—you shall go to your room and remain there until you can let up your whining."

And then she roughly conducted the unfortunate girl to the connecting room.

A sudden idea occurred to Springer. He glanced quickly around. Pollock had forgotten him for the time in his curiosity to examine a horse, and the other cowboys were engaged in various ways. That decided it. Springer gave

a light leap and entered the room; in a moment more his hand was on the package.

It was a small, brown paper, loosely folded, and he hastened to look at the contents. He had risked his life to destroy this package, though with but a vague idea of how it would benefit Carlotta. Burdick probably had plenty more. The contents proved to be a peculiar, dark powder of light-weight substance, and he was at once struck by its resemblance to common wood ashes.

This fact gave him an idea.

He hastened to the fire, threw the powder away, and began to refill it with ashes from the hearth.

Every moment he expected to be interrupted. Burdick and Dwandel were close at hand, and either might enter at any moment. The woman was sure to come soon. If he was discovered there, death—inevitable death—awaited him.

Still, his hands did not tremble, and with all possible haste he refilled the paper with the ashes. This done, he replaced it on the shelf.

So far all was well, but as he turned toward the window he saw Pollock looking around in all directions. Springer saw his danger, turned back, and then left the shanty by a rear door.

He had barely gone when he heard Dwandel in the room he had just left. It was a close call, and as he realized how narrow his escape had been he began to wonder what mad impulse had led him to the step. He knew his object—to see Carlotta freed from the thrall of the drug—but was not sure he had helped her any.

As he turned the corner of the shanty, he saw just before him on the plain, six mounds in a row. Above each rose a black cross, knife surmounted, and over each cross dangled a rope.

They were the graves of the men who had angered Captain Burdick, but it is doubtful if any of the number had gone so far as Springer went that day. Woe be to him if the pitiless valley chief learned the truth.

As he turned the next corner of the building, he saw Pollock moving toward him, and he sauntered along in the most matter-of-fact way imaginable. This satisfied the cowboy, who at once settled down to his ease.

Springer glanced toward the eastern mountains again. There must be something of interest to him there—or, rather, he looked to see something of interest—but whether he was satisfied was not apparent.

Night came. The ex-fugitive passed the evening with the band, and was in his most cheerful mood, and nothing occurred to show that his meddling with the powder had been discovered.

Later, he was given a blanket, and his sleeping-place indicated at a point between Pollock and another man. He lay down obediently, but it was far from his purpose to remain there quietly all night.

There were those who expected him at the foot of the eastern mountains with a report, and he intended to keep the appointment, if such a thing was possible. He was among the cowboys with no idle motive, and after beginning so well, with the trick of the fugitive and the sheriff, it would be unfortunate to lose all.

Yet he did not keep the appointment. Time and again during the hours which followed, he tried to secretly steal away, but each attempt partially awoke Pollock, and in the end he gave up and fell asleep.

It was broad day when he awoke.

Pollock was already up, and he greeted Springer very cheerfully, but the latter could have risen with hearty good will and throttled the fellow.

Another day began—crawled on its way—drew near a close. It was a period of great anxiety to Springer. He was obliged to pass all his time in the group of cowboys, for he knew that the moment he left them, Pollock would be at his heels. The muscular young fellow, who was at one and the same time his "pard" and his jailer, did not relax his vigilance.

Captain Burdick had sworn that if he did not do his duty his life should be the forfeit, and he knew that the grim captain meant what he said.

Springer knew it, too, and seeing how utterly useless an attempt to escape would be, settled down to the inevitable, and made heroic efforts to strengthen the good impression he had made upon Pollock.

And everything indicated that he was very successful.

Every moment Springer expected some indication that Carlotta's captors had discovered that the drug had been tampered with; the substitute had been of such a simple nature that, as time rolled on, he began to doubt if the original had really resembled ashes.

Had not his eyes deceived him, in the excitement of the moment?

The dreaded indication did not appear, and what little he saw of Burdick did not show any newly-aroused suspicion. On the whole the day was favorable in many ways, but there he was as a prisoner, and though he often looked at the eastern mountains he could not go there, while off at one side of the shanties six black crosses arose above six mounds and never allowed him to forget his position.

Several times he continued to get a view of Carlotta, and the result encouraged him. There was more color in her cheeks, and her whole appearance was more natural, bright and hopeful.

It really seemed as though she was recovering from the effect of the drug.

What would be the result of such a thing he did not know; it would bring matters to a crisis—and a disastrous crisis at that. He had been furnished with new weapons by Pollock, and was determined that if trouble came to the captive queen, and she needed a protector, he would boldly espouse her cause.

He knew what would be the result of such a course.

Burdick had two-score men at his back; half of them were always at hand; and any single man who braved the pitiless leader's wrath there would surely die, it seemed.

More than once Springer glanced at the six wounds, but though he knew not how soon a seventh might be raised, with him under it, he did not falter.

The sun descended the western sky—touched the rim of the hills—disappeared. Twilight fell.

Pollock, always interested when a horse was under examination, was engaged with an unruly animal of this species, and Springer wandered away almost unconsciously. He had no thought of escape, for he knew that he could not go a hundred yards without being stopped, but he wanted a little relief from his companions.

He scarcely noticed where he was going until, suddenly, the six mounds, with their black crosses, lay almost at his feet. He wheeled irritably. Why did these significant things so persistently intrude upon his troubled mind?

Turning, he saw some one advancing toward him, and it was not a man. A woman it was, and even in the dim light he could almost swear it was not Dwandel or Bet, Burdick's helpers.

It was a slighter, more girlish form than theirs; it was—Shades of the wonderful! it was Carlotta!

Springer's heart began to throb quickly, but he seemed utterly incapable of motion. He stood still while she advanced. Her steps were slow, hesitating and uncertain; she moved like one finding her way through utter darkness.

Suddenly his wits returned.

"Carlotta!" he exclaimed.

She abruptly paused.

"You know my name," she said, in a dreamy voice.

"Yes, and I know you; I have seen you in the old, the happier days. Carlotta, don't you know me? I am Allan Hamilton!"

The girl started perceptibly.

"You, *here*!" she murmured. "I thought you was dead. I thought *all* were dead save me."

Allan advanced a step and grasped her hand.

"No, no!" he said, hurriedly. "I am alive; I am here to try and save you. You are in great trouble—the captive of a cruel wretch. I am here to save you, but it cannot be done in a moment. I am only one man—though Burke Bruin and four of his followers are in the hills—and Captain Burdick has forty followers. The odds are terrible, but you shall be saved in some way. Bear that in mind. They have been giving you some vile drug which has stupefied you, but I trust you can now understand me. Be of good cheer—you shall be saved!"

He had poured forth this long address rapidly, and the girl put her hand to her head in an uncertain way.

"I don't fully understand," she said, plaintively, "but I know I am very unhappy. I have been under a cloud, and much of the past is a blank, but I am better now. Why did you send me here, Beckett Eagle?"

Allan felt a sensation of despair. Improved Carlotta certainly was, but she was still "under a cloud."

"I am not Beckett Eagle," he explained, "nor did I send you here. I am Allan Hamilton, and I have come to rescue you from Captain Burdick."

"Then let us go at once!" exclaimed the girl, in a dangerously loud voice. "We will lose no time. Where is Beckett Eagle? Tell him to summon the men and the horses—I am a queen, and I will be obeyed!"

A mocking laugh broke in on her speech, and startled Allan wheeled and saw Captain Burdick and several of his followers. They had almost surrounded the young couple.

"Ha! ha! you young fool!" cried the valley chief, "so you have shown your hand at last! Good! I suspected you from the first, and now you can say your prayers. In five minutes you die!"

CHAPTER XIX.

MOULD NUMBER SEVEN.

WHEN the sun rose the next morning the tops of the mountains were bathed in light, but the west side of the eastern peak—that toward which the new cowboy recruit had often looked—was still dark and cool.

High up the peak a ledge ran along the face

of a cliff, and on this ledge two men were standing. They were well known to the reader, being Burke Bruin and Ben Ali. The former held a field-glass through which he was looking earnestly, it being directed upon the cowboy camp below.

The Arab spy watched him closely.

"What do you make out?" he finally asked.

"Nothing new. Men are plentiful, but I see no one who looks like Allan."

"And the outlaw chief?"

"Has not yet appeared."

"My own eyes tell me the girl is not visible."

"You are right."

Bluff Bruin sighed unconsciously, and then slowly added:

"Ben Ali, my mind is full of dark forebodings."

"Do not despair. If the clouds hang low, trust in the Ruler of earth and sky, be He the God of your people or mine."

"If I could see young Hamilton, I should be strong enough, but if harm has come to him, I shall never forgive myself. I should not have allowed him to go."

"It was a plan of his forming, and he insisted on going."

"What of that? He was not so old in adventure and experience as the rest of us. Perhaps he was as wise—who can say as to that?—but I had a right to take the risk upon myself. There would have been no tears shed if I had fallen."

"Bruin!" ejaculated the Arab, reproachfully.

"Forgive me, Ben Ali; I know you would give. But there is still no Hamilton. Old friend, I fear the worst from the shooting which Pol saw just after dark last night."

"Do not the cowboys often shoot?"

"Yes, but in this case, according to Polk, there were several shots in rapid succession—their ominous silence. I can even locate the place where he says this occurred, and see near it what looks like half a dozen mounds, with crosses upon them. Ugh! they are like graves, and very suggestive. Ben Ali, I fear for Allan!"

The speaker's voice was grave to despondency, but Ben Ali still presented a brighter view of the case.

"There are several shanties—the young man may be in one of them, all right."

"I wish I could believe it, but all things go to prove to the contrary. The fact that he failed to keep his appointment with us proves that he could not get away. What is the natural inference? Simply that he was suspected and watched. Then came the shooting at dusk last evening—was it not a fight?—and now Allan is missing. Ben Ali, I am afraid that our young friend easily tried to rescue Queen Eagle, was discovered shot by Captain Burdick."

All the Arab argued against the theory, but, rey, no one was more concerned than he. For twenty-five years he had led a life of wild adventure, fighting the wild beasts and hostile men of both continents, and he would have been more than human if, with his experience, he had not doubted the ability of a young, inexperienced man like Allan Hamilton.

They were still discussing the point when Ben's watchful gaze discovered two men advancing from the shanties to the peculiar mounds of which he had spoken to the Arab. Arriving there they began some work which paled Ben Ali, but his companion, looking through the glass, suddenly exclaimed:

"Great heavens!"

"What now?"

"What do you suppose is being done there?"

"I don't know."

"They are digging up the ground a few feet away from the sixth mound, and their excavation is shaped like a grave?"

He turned his face toward Ben Ali, and there was a moment of painful silence.

"Do not leap to a conclusion," finally urged the Arab. "Watch the result of their work. It may not be a grave, and even if it proves to be so, it does not show that Allan is the dead man. To me it looks more likely that he, if killed there, would be carried off and thrown anywhere. Those mounds, if, indeed, they are graves, are probably those of their own men. The fact that crosses are erected proves that the dead men were respected and honored."

Ben Ali did not know of the significant attachments to the cross—the ropes and the knives.

The work went on in the valley until the object of the excavation could be doubted no longer. A systematic grave was dug, and then the two cowboys rested from their labor. But the most impressive part of all was yet to come. Out from one of the shanties came a group which Burke Bruin was not at a loss to analyze through his field-glass.

They were cowboys, and they bore a heavy burden which they conveyed at once to the grave. That it was the lifeless body of a man was plain, and Bruin's face grew dark with suppressed feeling.

"Oh! that the band was here!" he exclaimed. "We would sweep these ruffians from existence, and slay them to the last man to revenge poor Hamilton!"

Ben Ali did not answer; he had not the courage to advance an opinion which his common

sense told him was incorrect. He, too, was inclined to give Allan up as lost.

All the cowboys collected around the grave, but their manner was not that of mourners. Bruin even believed that he could see a mixture of sullen anger and fear in their manner. Had he known just what the six mounds implied he might have suspected that they were there by Burdick's order as an example—to see another traitor placed under ground—and to receive a vivid warning.

The body was lowered—the grave refilled—the mound raised, and the black cross planted.

Then Burdick, with his own hands, drove a bowie-knife in the top of the cross and dangled a rope over the arms thereof—movements which Bruin saw, but only partially comprehended. Even to him, though, they were very significant.

Then the seventh mound of the terrible row was finished,

The cowboys scattered and went back to their former places, while the Bruin King turned to Ben Ali with a hard, unnatural look on his face.

"I would give ten years of my life to have the band here now," he said, in a tense voice.

"If Allan Hamilton is dead they could not help him now, while, as for the rest, we will find some way of baffling that arch-schemer."

"We are five; they are forty."

"What if they are four hundred?" cried the Arab, in a voice that rang out with almost startling force. "Is it not against Carl Rogerson we work? Let him call himself Captain Burdick, and rally his cut-throats about him, *I know him at last!* Yes, I know him, and earth, nor sea, shall hide him from my vengeance. Burke Bruin, these hills and valleys grow dim before my sight, and I see again the desert of the tropics; I see the dead man whose blood turned the white sand red. And here I find the end of my trail of vengeance—and Carl Rogerson. Will I falter simply because he has two-score ruffians to do his bidding?"

Burke had more cause to feel deeply on the subject than the giant Arab, but his voice was calm as he replied:

"I know, Ben Ali; I know. And who is more anxious than I to strike Carl Rogerson down? But the plan—the way—the means. How is it to be done?"

"We must meditate. Let us call the others, explain all, and tell each to put his wits to work."

Ben Ali had grown calm, and he strode from the shelf of rock. Ten minutes later he returned with Polk, Lorimer and Hagen, the members of the band they had taken on the expedition; and they were first given an account of the probable situation in the valley, in which statement it was admitted that Allan Hamilton was probably dead, and then asked to put their wits to work in an attempt to find a plan which should result in Queen Carlotta's rescue, and the capture of Captain Burdick.

The day was passed in considering ways and means, and in watching the valley.

One occupation was about as successful as the other.

Nothing was seen of Allan Hamilton, or Carlotta, and all their efforts to find a strategic scheme failed. Many ideas were advanced, discussed and rejected. Opposed to each were the stubborn facts that Burdick had a large force, that he took great precautions to guard against attack, and that he was not a man to be deceived by a common trick.

Out of all this interchange of opinions grew one plan, not strategic, but simply bold, venturesome—yes, full of deadly peril.

It was settled that, let the result be what it might, Bluff Bruin and Ben Ali should that night make an effort to pass the guards and reach the shanties.

It was a desperate undertaking. They knew that, besides the sentinels near the buildings, two cowboys were always riding at night in a circle around the shanties. It seemed almost impossible to escape detection, but those two bold men were prepared to try.

Midnight came and found the quintette at the foot of the mountain. There Polk, Lorimer and Hagan were to remain, ready for any emergency while the two leaders went forward on their mission.

The character of the night was favorable. Dark clouds lay piled against the sky in masses, and there would be no moon. Thus far they were favored.

"Are you ready?" asked Bruin, looking at the Arab.

"All ready."

"One thing, old friend. Do not let your desire to strike down Carl Rogerson run away with your judgment. Bear in mind that humanity requires our first duty to be the rescue of Carlotta."

Ben Ali laid his broad hand on Burke's arm.

"I understand all!" he replied.

"Then forward!"

They shook hands with their comrades, and glided away like dark phantoms.

"We've seen the last o' them," said Lorimer.

"Not much!" retorted Polk sturdily.

"Maybe thar'll be two more mounds fur us to see, but that's all. They're as good as doomed."

"If you think it you don't know those men,"

persisted Polk. "If it is in the power of mankind to do that job, they'll do it. I'd rather trust them than an army."

"Wal, I hope ye're right, but you must admit they hav taken desp'rit chances."

Burke and the Arab knew this, anyway, and as they glided along, they kept their eyes strained to catch the first sight of a mounted patrol. The darkness of the night was not thicker than the dangers they were daring, and the game must be played with superlative skill.

CHAPTER XX.

HOW THE SCHEME WORKED.

KEEPING close together, the adventurers moved on, and they had advanced to within thirty rods of the buildings before any discovery whatever was made. Then, simultaneously, they discovered a mounted patrol, and both dropped to the ground and lay without motion.

A period of acute suspense followed. If the patrol kept his course, he would not pass within some distance of them—they were inside his circle—but any deviation must inevitably prove disastrous to them.

With weapons held ready for use, Burke and Ben Ali waited.

The patrol advanced, his horse moving at a walk, rode abreast of them—and passed on. He had not once turned his head in their direction; he seemed to pay attention only to the region outside his circle.

He went, and then the adventurers arose and moved on toward the shanties. What they had overcome was only a drop in the sea compared to what was before them. The cowboy sentinels were yet to be passed—then it remained to discover Carlotta and Burdick.

Still forward they went, and then Ben Ali suddenly touched Bruin's arm and stopped him.

"Hark!" he said.

"What is it?"

"Voices."

Burke listened. He, too, could dimly hear the sound.

"Does that mean two guards in conversation, or is an officer making the rounds?" he asked.

"The former, I hope and believe. We must lose no time; fate may have wonderfully interfered in our behalf. Follow my example!"

Ben Ali spoke hurriedly, and at once dropped upon his hands and knees, and began creeping forward in that position. Burke Bruin promptly imitated him.

It was a moment of painful suspense, and both every second expected to hear a challenge, or even to see the flash of a rifle. They could expect no mercy if discovered.

On—on! Inch by inch, but the buildings grew nearer, and it became clear that negligence on the part of the sentinels was responsible for their great good fortune. They could now see the delinquents dimly, and were exposed to the same danger themselves.

One glance their way might ruin all.

But, at last, with a sigh of relief, they reached the sheltering walls of the nearest building. A second danger was passed. Men less brave than they would have despaired at the thought of what must next come.

While on the mountain they had used the field-glass to the best of their ability, to locate the particular buildings occupied by Burdick and Carlotta. The latter's prison they believed they knew, but they were less certain as to Burdick's quarters.

They paused only a moment in this shelter, but moved to the walls of the third building beyond. Within this place they believed Carlotta to be imprisoned.

Burke would have advised Ben Ali to give up all thought of revenge on Burdick until Carlotta was rescued and safe in the mountains, but he knew it would be folly to urge the point. Ben Ali was almost mad to get at him who had once been Carl Rogerson.

It had been arranged, much against Burke's wishes, that when they reached this point he should undertake to get Carlotta from the shanty, while the Arab went on to attend to Burdick, and the swarthy spy did not lose any time.

"Remember!" he said, and glided away.

It was not wise—this separation—but Ben Ali would have it so.

He showed the skill of an Indian in his movements, and reached the building where he believed his enemy to be without any break. There he paused. There might be a dozen men inside, but he had reason to believe that Burdick was there, alone.

Carefully he tried the door.

It was locked, or fastened in some way.

Then he went to the window. Glass for such purposes was unknown in the valley; only a piece of heavy cloth hung over the aperture.

Ben Ali listened. He thought he could hear the breathing of a sleeper, and he raised his powerful form with almost marvelous caution, passed through and stood on the floor inside. Then he was, indeed, in the tiger's lair.

Near him slept the merciless valley chief; around him were the cowboys to the number of two-score. One cry would alarm the camp and bring ruin upon him, and that cry might be brought forth at any moment by a single false

move on his part. It was black as night could be—should he run against a chair, or other article of furniture, the captain would be awakened.

Ben Ali drew a long, deep breath. Bold as he was he realized his peril, and the very air seemed heavy with danger.

Forward he moved—slowly, cautiously. His skill was remarkable. His steps were almost cat-like. In his hands he held both a revolver and a knife, and his great limbs were strained for a leap, back or forward.

Suddenly—almost as suddenly as the lightning's flash—the scene changed. Darkness gave place to light. Where Ben Ali had before been unable to see because of the first cause, he was now dazzled by the second.

Yet through the blinding light he saw a bed, and upon it sat Captain Burdick, dark, cool and smiling—it was the smile of a triumphant demon, and so might a bloodthirsty tiger smile—while his outstretched hand held a gleaming revolver.

"So!" he cried, with mocking sarcasm, "there is one more man who wants a black cross, is there? Advance, you, and show me who you are!"

The Arab did not waver. The watchful, cunning captain had won one move, and the chances seemed all in his favor, but there was one resort yet untried.

Two steps the son of the East advanced, and then he paused and drew his massive form to its utmost stature.

"Look!" he cried, in a thrilling voice. "Look, and behold who I am, Carl Rogerson!"

The captain made a sudden start. His gloating, triumphant air disappeared, and in its place came a startled look. He had heard a name which he supposed was buried in the grave of the past, and it filled him with sudden fear.

And he who had uttered the name—who was he?

Burdick looked "with all his eyes," and those eyes were large, round and startled then. Surely that stalwart man was not one of his followers. No, no! The dark face—the strange garb. Powers of Mercy! the discovery was come at last!

"Ben Ali!" gasped the valley chief, and for the first time in years his face paled.

"Yes, Carl Rogerson, it is I!" the Arab retorted. "You did not think to see me here."

"I would rather see the devil."

"I don't doubt it. Carl Rogerson, I have been long in finding you, but we have met at last."

While the swarthy spy spoke he was keenly watching for a chance to spring upon his enemy. He had hoped that his revelation would furnish the chance, but, startled as Burdick was, his revolver hand remained steady. Ben Ali watched with cat-like attention. Once let that hand drop, and the revolver turn aside, and he would spring forward like a tiger.

As it was, his own hand was on his revolver, and if the worst came, it would be a question of who could shoot the quicker.

"I thought you dead," Burdick muttered.

"No doubt you hoped so, but I still live—live as the avenger of Gordon Bruce."

"The Bedouins who killed him may all be dead now."

Ben Ali smiled coldly.

"The Bedouins were but tools," he replied. "Think you that I do not know the truth? Carl Rogerson, his blood is on your hands. You set the Bedouins upon him—you are the real murderer!"

"It is false! What, I? I, who was Gordon Bruce's friend? Ben Ali, you wrong me; I swear it!"

It would have amazed the cowboys to see the valley tyrant so humble; he who had never condescended to so much as argue a point with them; but every tyrant is a coward at heart, and Burdick stood in awe of the stalwart Arab.

"You swear to a lie. Carl Rogerson, I have the dying statement of Gordon Bruce, as well as the story of Malbar, the Hottentot, and you are indelibly branded a murderer. You did all this at the instigation of Edmund Allison, and then turned double traitor, and struck him down, too. Confess!"

"Never, for it is false—all false!"

"Dare you say Allison was innocent?"

"Allison?"

"Yes."

"What is he to me? I say I am innocent."

"Carl Rogerson, you lie! Your victim himself saw your perfidy, and when you thought him dead, he recovered for a time, and told all. You—you invited the desert robbers there and gave them their prey!"

Ben Ali spoke in a thrilling voice, and the valley chief was not ready with his answer.

"It is false!" he finally muttered.

"Beware!"

"Of what?"

"Of me. I am Gordon Bruce's avenger."

"Fool!" cried Burdick, a defiant, ominous gleam in his eyes, "do you know to whom you speak?"

"I know well."

"I am Captain Burdick, and you are in the

camp of my forty followers, each one of whom will cut a throat at my mere bidding."

"I know it well."

"Ha! perhaps you are an ally of Allan Hamilton?" And a new gleam appeared in the captain's eyes.

"I am."

"Good! He is dead, and you shall follow him. Fool! you have put your head into a noose, and your blood shall pay for your temerity. I have only to raise my voice and cry for help, and—"

"And thereby seal your death-warrant," Ben Ali interrupted, in an icy tone.

"How?"

"I mean just what I say. Do not suppose because you are here among your ready assassins that I hold you in fear. Your men I scorn, as I do you, and though you had ten-score men at your back I should still say—Carl Rogerson, I am face to face with you at last, and Gordon Bruce shall be avenged!"

As the last word was tensely spoken, a single revolver-shot rang out on the air. It was followed by others—all from the quarter where Burke Bruin was working. Clearly, he had been discovered!

CHAPTER XXI.

FIGHTING THEIR WAY.

THIS startling interruption put a new face on the entire matter. Bruin had been detected, and the shots would arouse the whole camp. In a few seconds the cowboys would be swarming like bees, and then—woe to whoever was found in their midst as an enemy.

Ben Ali's resolution was taken in a moment.

Disregarding the revolver he bounded upon Burdick as a cyclone might move. But the valley chief was not taken off his guard. Something of the kind he had expected, and he was prepared.

A triumphant smile curled his lips and he pulled the trigger. The bullet passed between Ben Ali's side and arm, cutting his clothing in its passage.

In another moment he reached Burdick, and his strong hand swung a knife aloft and then—down, down to seek a way through the outlaw's flesh. But the latter was as alert as ever. He squirmed to one side and avoided the stroke, and in a moment more the room was again in darkness.

He had kicked over the table upon which stood the light.

Almost at the same time he tried to wrench himself clear, but the Arab's hold seemed like that of a vise. Again he struck with the knife, and Burdick received a wound in the arm; only the darkness had saved his life.

He was growing desperate. Bully and tyrant that he was, he feared the stalwart Arab, and his voice sounded in wild cries for help. He could hear a tumult outside which showed that his followers were aroused—oh! for help!—help! He panted, struggled, and shouted, feeling as helpless as though he was in the grasp of a tiger.

Another slight wound was added to his hurts, and he was in despair. At this rate Ben Ali would literally chop him to pieces.

Chance, however, favored Burdick. In their struggle they reeled against some article of furniture, tripped, and both fell. As they went down the Arab's hold was broken, and Burdick saw his chance. He sprung to his feet, ran to the window, leaped out, and ran for his life.

On, on—anywhere—madly, blindly!—anywhere to escape the demon who sought his life!

Ben Ali's fall had been heavy, and he was momentarily dazed. When he rose he instinctively felt that Burdick had fled from the room. His knife had fallen from his hand when he fell, but he drew a revolver and sprung from the window.

Truly, the cowboys were like a swarm of bees. They were rushing about without much idea of what was wrong, and when each came out he was surprised that he could find no enemy to fight.

What meant the tumult?

Ben Ali looked in vain for Burdick, and believing that he had sought shelter among his men, the dauntless Arab promptly rushed in among them. What was it to him that they were as thick as fruit on a tree? He had a mission to perform, and intended to do it, if possible, let the danger be what it might; so he elbowed the cowboys unceremoniously aside and pressed on, always looking for Burdick.

But suddenly he saw another sight. There was fighting at one side of the camp, and as the night had grown lighter, he caught the flutter of a woman's attire.

The truth rushed upon him; Burke Bruin had managed to get Carlotta clear of the shanty, and was now fighting to save her from the outlaws.

Instantly Ben Ali came to his senses, and he ran rapidly toward the quarter of peril, uttering as he did so a clear, wild war-cry which had often rung out on the air in his native land. One glance showed him that Bruin had secured several horses and mounted Carlotta upon one of them, but he was so sorely beset that he could not himself mount.

Into this confused knot of fighting-men Ben

Ali went, with a war-cry even wilder than those before it—the strangest sound ever heard in the valley—and in a moment he was busy. Such fighting as followed amazed even the outlaws. The Arab seemed to go through their ranks like a cyclone; then, reaching Bruin's side, he was as active and dangerous as a tiger in upholding the cause he had espoused.

Bluff Bruin was the coolest man there, and he knew the importance of speedy departure. Once let the whole band understand the situation and get at them, and they were doomed.

He spoke a few words to the Arab, and they prepared for the great effort. The horses were at hand, and it remained to mount them and flee. Suddenly the two strong men made a forward sweep, and the cowboys were driven resolutely back several paces.

It was the desired chance.

Burke and Ben Ali wheeled, sprung to their ready steeds, and in a moment more, rescuers and rescued were alike dashing away as fast as the horses could carry them. Four riders were in the party, and he who rode beside Carlotta, holding her horse by the bit, was—Allan Hamilton.

Ben Ali looked over at him, and smiled grimly.

"You fought well," he said.

He spoke the truth. It had been Allan who held the horses during the fight, but the young man had not been idle otherwise. He had kept his revolvers playing on the crowd, and it was clear that the twelve cartridges must have lone some execution.

"We thought you dead," the Arab added.

"I owe my life to Burke Bruin," said Alan, briefly.

Carlotta started.

"Burke Bruin?" she uttered. "What of him? Oh, don't tell me he is near!"

"If so, he is your friend," Allan urged.

"My friend! As much so as the rattlesnake or grizzly bear. I owe all my troubles to him, villain that he is!"

Not a word spoke Burke Bruin. However the accusation fell upon his ears he bore it silently, but he gave no sign that he heard when Alan addressed him in a low voice, bidding him overlook the charge, as Carlotta was not responsible for what she said or did.

But there were now other matters to engage their attention. One by one the cowboys ere securing horses and sweeping along in punts, and from the foremost of the gang the shanties stretched a line of wild riders, alacrily endeavoring to cut down the fugitives' lead-all yellings like madmen.

The fugitives were still within easy rifle-shot, but the darkness was in their favor.

Nobody fired.

The great question now became—had our friends secured good horses in the lottery of selection? Could they hold their own, or would they be overtaken?

By a tacit understanding Carlotta remained under Allan's immediate charge. She had gained greatly, mentally and physically, but her manner was wild, and he feared she might make some rash, irresponsible move which would cause trouble.

But the hills were finally reached, and there they found their three allies waiting.

There was no time to lose; the cowboys were close behind.

"Leave the horses!" ordered Bruin. "They only of escape—keep together, and get as much of a start up the mountain as possible."

They leaped to the ground and their flight was continued. Bruin had directed Lorimer and Allan in conducting Carlotta, and as the latter was perfectly docile, all went well. Bruin Polk and Ben Ali brought up the rear, but the Arab's hands worked nervously on the barrel of his rifle—which weapon had been left with Polk when they went to the camp—his nostrils dilated, and he often looked back longingly.

The pursuers had lost no time in continuing the chase on foot, but among the mountain gulches the darkness was intense, and Hagan, who led the flight, had taken pains to study out the most favorable course.

Thus it was that, after a time, he made a sharp turn to the right just where it was not to be expected, and the trick succeeding well, they had the satisfaction at the end of five minutes of knowing that the enemy was off the track.

Then they went directly to the cave they had used as a shelter since coming to the vicinity.

It was not until they were entering this place that Burke Bruin noticed that Ben Ali was absent. He mentioned the fact in a startled voice, but Polk at once replied:

"He went on purpose."

"Went where?"

"Back to the valley, I suspect."

"Madman! he will meet his fate. Polk Bruin, you knew this and did not tell me!"

Stern was the chief's voice, but his follower quickly answered:

"Ben Ali ordered me to remain silent until you discovered his absence, King Bruin, and then say that he would take care of himself. So I said nothing."

"You did very wrong—yet I have often told

you to obey him in all things. His blood will be on his own head. Poor Ali!"

The speaker was half-inclined to turn back, himself, and seek for his bold followers, who, he knew, had gone in search of Carl Rogerson, but he overcame the impulse and followed the others into the cave.

Carlotta, now that the excitement was over, showed an unnatural tendency to sleep, and as Allan knew this would be the best help for her, he conducted her to an alcove which Polk Bruin had arranged with great care for the very purpose.

Burke did not come near, or manifest any interest in Carlotta, and Allan would have blamed him greatly had he not remembered how the Bruin chief fought in her defense in the valley. That atoned for a good deal.

Again, he saw that their leader's heart was heavy. He could not settle down by the fire as the other men did. Ben Ali was absent, engaged in a perilous enterprise, and Burke had little hope that he would come back alive.

Hours passed, and all in the cave slept save Burke. He remained at the entrance, silent, gloomy and statue-like.

CHAPTER XXII.

CARLOTTA AND BRUIN.

BLUFF BRUIN'S patience was thoroughly tested before relief came, but, just before dawn of day, Ben Ali returned. He looked none the worse for his experience, but even his rugged frame was weary at last and he gladly sunk down near the fire.

He looked at the sleeping men, and then at Burke, who had not reproached him in the least.

"You have waited for me," he said. "I will not ask your forgiveness, for I knew you would not approve of it, but I am sorry you have been troubled. But, King Bruin, you don't know how my hand ached to get hold of Rogerson."

"Did you find him?"

"No. I took great risk, but he was not to be found. Even the cowboys had lost sight of him, and they classed him among the slain. Bah! he had run away like a coward."

"Daylight will bring back his courage, and then we shall have music about our ears."

"Let them come!" the spy retorted.

"We can make it warm for them; all that worries us is the fact that the cave is so large and eccentric of shape. There may be dozens of entrances."

"Well, we are six determined men. Let them come!"

"They will come."

"Bruin, lie down and rest; I will stand guard."

"No. Lie down yourself. I depend on you to take charge here during the forenoon. I must have sleep then, anyway. Let me stand the night out."

"As you will."

With these words the Arab spread his blanket, and in a few minutes he was wrapped in sleep. Burke returned to the entrance and resumed his old position, but even Ben Ali's return had not sufficed to rouse him from his gloom. Evidently the Bruin King's mind was not at ease.

Half an hour passed. Day was breaking, and gray shadows, crowding back the darker ones, were themselves threatened with annihilation by the golden light of Old Sol.

A footstep sounded behind King Bruin; he thought Ben Ali had arisen, and turned. Some one was there, but not Ben Ali.

It was Carlotta.

Bruin's face flushed a deep red, and then grew far paler than usual. His habitual ready speech failed him then.

Carlotta was there, and her whole appearance was that of one restored to reason. Her features bore traces of suffering, but the intelligence of a well-balanced mind was visible in her face and eyes. There was, however, an ominous sparkle in those dark orbs of sight.

"So, King Bruin," she said, "I am your prisoner?"

"My prisoner?"

"Yes."

"I do not understand—"

"But I do. My mind has been under a cloud—which caused it I will not say, but I have dim recollections of captivity; of noxious drugs I have been forced to drink; of cruel and abusive treatment. My mind has been clouded, I say, but it is now clear. The immediate past I cannot recall, but the present I fully understand. I know that I am far from the Sable Circle, and I realize that I have been abducted by you!"

"Great heavens!" Bruin ejaculated, "why do you think that?"

"I should be blind not to see it."

"But it is not true. I—"

"Why add to your sins? Tell me at once why I am here? Are you so relentless, so thoroughly barbarian, that you had to proceed to this extreme?"

"Miss Allison," cried Bruin, his face working strangely, "I swear to you that you misjudge me. Your abduction was due to Girdrock, and a certain Captain Burdick, and I have rescued you from the latter after some—"

"You have rescued me?"

The scorn contained in her voice made Burke

flush again, but it also served to make him calmer.

He folded his arms and tersely replied:

"I!"

"No doubt you put yourself to much trouble to rescue me!"

"Say on!"

"And you expect me to believe your statement?"

"Say on!"

"King Bruin, let us understand each other. I don't want you to think me so blindly credulous as to believe you now, but I am somewhat surprised at your unrelenting persecution. Was it not enough that you should rob me of my fortune?"

"Go on!" Bruin somberly directed.

"It was an evil day for the Allisons when they met the Bruce family. Out in the Eastern desert my father died at the hands of Gordon—"

"Stop!" Burke commanded. "You go too far now, Carlotta Allison. Say what you will of me; accuse me of wronging you out of your property, and of being the greatest villain unhung, if you will; but do not dare to insult my dead father. Gordon Bruce was as honorable a man as ever lived. Confining your remarks to his villainous son!"

Carlotta hesitated, sighed, and then said, in a milder voice:

"Why am I a captive?"

"You are not."

"Then why am I here?"

"I have told you already."

"And a likely story you told. Would you go a rod to rescue me from my enemies? Who is the mythical Captain Burdick you mentioned, and why should he kidnap me? Prove that I am not a prisoner by letting me pass!"

"One word. Perhaps there are others here whom you will believe, if not me. You know Allan Hamilton. Would you believe what he might tell you?"

Carlotta hesitated, and then answered:

"Yes."

"Happy Allan!"

The girl shot a quick, searching glance at Bruin's face. His last ejaculation had seemed to contain so many different emotions, among which bitterness played a part, that her curiosity could not well fail to be aroused.

King Bruin, however, went quickly to Allan's side and aroused him. He had left the cave-exit free, but something prevented Carlotta from leaving; indeed, she scarcely thought of the matter. Allan quickly rose, grasping his rifle with a sense of danger upon him, but soon grew reassured, and, advancing to Carlotta's side, shook her hand and expressed his pleasure at seeing her so improved.

"Hamilton," interrupted Burke, "I want you to go aside with Miss Allison—Queen Eagle, I mean—and tell her just what has occurred since we left the Sable Circle."

With these words the speaker walked abruptly away, and Allan, somewhat perplexed, led Carlotta to a seat and told the story.

He told of their long search; the discovery of the enemy; the odds against them; the trick by which he gained entrance to the valley, when Polk Bruin acted sheriff and drove him in; and his own adventures in the valley.

Some explanation will be of general interest here.

Strangely enough, Allan's manipulation of the powder was not discovered, and, freed from the drug, Carlotta had a good deal recovered when she met Allan that night by the mounds.

Discovered by Burdick, as before described, Allan fought gallantly and shot two of the cowboys, but was finally overpowered. Then Burdick ordered him hung at once. A cowboy interfered in Allan's behalf, and was at once shot down by the tyrant—and it was his grave that was made during the day.

The interruption, however, saved Allan. Burdick changed his mind and, to make the punishment more painful, ordered him imprisoned for three days, without food or drink, before the sentence was carried out.

When Burke Bruin investigated in the camp he first found Allan, whom he freed, and then it was not hard to find Carlotta, as her prison was known to Allan.

The story was told, and Carlotta was convinced. More than that, she was humbled—almost crushed. She thanked Allan warmly, but the rest of her task was not so easy. She had learned that Bruin, instead of stealing her away, had risked his life to rescue her, and as she remembered her bitter words to him, her face grew crimson.

An apology was vitally necessary, and she would almost as soon die as to make it. Brave, Burke Bruin surely was—she had known that before—but was he not a villain, and her bitter persecutor and enemy?

And she must apologize to him!

"Never! never!" she cried aloud.

"Excuse me; I did not understand?" said Allan.

"No matter!"

She spoke almost curtly and turned away. Looking toward the entrance, she saw Bruin's stalwart form there. He was leaning against the rock, and his back was toward her, but the

very nature of the case, unpromising as it was, led her to a decision.

She moved quickly toward him.

"King Bruin!"

He turned as she spoke, and bowed respectfully, but a shadow was on his face wherein injured pride and haughty disdain had place.

"Yes, Queen Eagle."

"I find that—I have done you—injustice," said Carlotta, evidently speaking with an effort.

"Allan Hamilton has given a full explanation."

Bruin bowed, but not a word passed his lips.

"Having learned my mistake I apologize, and I thank you for helping me. I am glad to find that you are not without one redeeming trait."

Again the bow; nothing more. Carlotta's eyes flashed, and she turned and walked quickly away. With one brief glance after her, Bruin again turned to his post and stood looking outside. What was in his mind no one could have surmised; his strong face had never been more unreadable; but it was scarcely the expression of a happy man.

There was a brief pause, and then footsteps again sounded by his side. He turned; Carlotta was again there. Her face was flushed, her calmness was disturbed, and one hand was toying restlessly with the fringe of her jaunty waist.

"King Bruin," she said, with the manner of one carrying out a fixed, yet unpleasant, task, "the apology I have just made to you was ungracious and curt. I realize this, and have double pardon to ask. I have wronged you in one respect; I accused you of abducting me, when you had just risked your life for me. I am sorry that I spoke so hastily, so unjustly, and I hope you will forgive me."

There was a curious mixture of frankness, reserve, humbleness and disdain in her manner, yet the less noble emotions were kept well under control. She had evidently nerved herself to do justice, and the effort was far from being an outward failure.

"I freely pardon you, Queen Eagle," Bruin promptly, gravely replied. "Let us forget that a mistake was made."

"I have heard that you fought heroically in my behalf."

"I only did my duty. You were a woman."

"And you put aside for the time the fact that I was Carlotta Eagle."

"Not so; I remembered it well. Perhaps, too, it gave additional strength to my arm."

This was hesitatingly said, but did not seem to please the Scarlet Queen.

"I wished to do you justice," she slowly remarked.

A sudden gleam appeared in his eyes.

"I wish, Queen Eagle, that you would suspend your judgment in other matters until you know that I am guilty."

Carlotta made a quick gesture, as though to interrupt him, but Bruin went on rapidly:

"I have men investigating matters which grew out of Samuel Elbridge's will, and it would please me if you would wait until you hear the report before condemning me utterly."

"Let us not bring this up. According to what Mr. Hamilton tells me we must be companions for awhile; let us bury our differences during this time."

She evidently tried to speak forbearingly, kindly, but a cold, skeptical vein ran through all.

"I wish they could be buried eternally!" Bruin exclaimed.

Carlotta made no direct reply, but, after a short silence, she more lightly asked:

"I am told that Captain Burdick will doubtless pursue us. What are our chances?"

"I may say that we have a fighting chance. The odds are against us, but, knowing my followers as I do, I have faith to believe that we shall win. Have hope, Queen Eagle!"

"Can you tell me why Burdick kidnapped me?"

"No."

"And Girdrock—what has become of that scoundrel?"

"He has utterly disappeared; where, I don't know. It seems likely that he has taken the money stolen from the Eagle treasury as his share, and fled."

"I hope to see him again," said Carlotta, her eyes suddenly glittering; then she abruptly arched, turned and walked away.

"My duty is done," she thought. "I have made an humble apology, and he can ask no more. But I wish I had not remained so long in conversation with him."

She glanced back toward the entrance. Burke Bruin had again relapsed into a statue, except that his gaze was ever on the alert to discover the first sign of the danger he knew would come.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE COWBOYS COME.

BEN ALI arose and approached his leader.

"Does all remain quiet?" he asked.

"Thus far, yes."

"I would suggest that you arouse the men, and then, while you seek needed rest, I will go out and discover just where the enemy are, and what they are doing."

That this was good advice Bruin could not dispute, and the idea was carried out. Polk, Hagan and Lorimer were aroused, and the Arab took his rifle and went out on a scout. So great was King Bruin's faith in him, he received neither advice nor caution; he had been a scout and spy in his own land, as well as in the West.

When he was gone Burke lay down, leaving directions for Polk to call him if there was anything new.

Carlotta had many questions to ask Allan, but he could give her little news. He knew that Beckett Eagle had taken a portion of that clan and gone to rescue their queen, but what had become of them he did not know. Neither could he tell her of Girdrock, though he was of Bruin's opinion and believed that the traitorous Eagle had taken the stolen gold and fled as fast as he could go.

The queen's brows were contracted as they talked of him, and she declared that the clan would not rest until they had found him. According to what Allan had heard Beckett say, the robbery had been a heavy one, and the Eagles would not tamely bear the loss of their gold.

Ben Ali returned at the end of an hour.

"There is no immediate danger," he said, meeting Carlotta's gaze.

"Did you see the cowboys?" Allan asked.

"Yes, and they are about to move upon us. There is activity in the valley, and it seems that the whole force is coming against us. Probably Burdick is again at their head."

"Would it not be well to take to flight while we can?" Carlotta asked.

The spy shook his head.

"We have carefully considered that. The chances would be against us if we took to flight now, though it must sooner or later come to that. Our horses are on the other side of the mountain; when the proper time arrives we will try to reach them, and get a good start before they know we are gone. Just now, their sentinels are well thrown out, even beyond the mountain. Here we must stay for awhile. Fortunately, we are provisioned for a considerable siege."

"Can you give me weapons?" the warrior queen asked.

"If you wish."

"I do wish it. I can, at least, protect myself."

Ben Ali went to one side, and then returned and gave her a pair of finely-mounted revolvers.

"There is a rifle yonder," he said, pointing.

"Thank you."

Carlotta turned abruptly away. She was not pleased with the chance which made Bruin and Ben Ali the leaders there. She shrank from both with fear and loathing. If Allan Hamilton had been in charge she could have endured their presence with some degree of equanimity, but those two were the leaders, and she had to speak with them when her whole nature revolted at the thought.

Allan realized something of this, for he had not forgotten her interview with Ben Ali in the neutral valley, but his sympathies were setting, tide-like, in favor of the two men who had seemed as honorable as they were bold.

Carlotta was in danger of losing the only friend she had there.

Ben Ali announced that he was going out to watch the enemy further, and Allan asked for and received permission to accompany him. They went to a point where they could see well, and at the same time be sheltered themselves.

The cowboy valley had a changed appearance. Only about ten men were visible near the camp, and it was plain that all the rest had been ordered to the search for the fugitives. Many of them were visible.

Looking down the mountain they could see at one point what seemed much like a dark serpent winding through a canyon. It was a line of cowboys coming on to oppose the fugitives.

"Warm work ahead," Allan observed.

"I believe you."

"Do you suppose they will find our cave?"

"I will be frank. I think they will find the way to it without much trouble. Then it remains to be seen whether they can effect an entrance."

"The mouth of the cave is narrow; I believe we can defend it successfully."

"You forget that the cave is large and spreading. There may be entrances of which we know nothing, and they may find them. Therein lies our danger."

Allan was silent for several minutes, during which time he watched the serpent-line of men below. Then Ben Ali suddenly touched his arm.

"Look!" said the Arab.

Allan obeyed. Another line of men had become visible, and this was much nearer than the first—indeed, had they been on the same level they would have been almost side by side, but the precipice which lay at our friends' feet placed the cowboys four hundred feet below.

Suddenly Ben Ali started, his hands closed nervously around the barrel of his rifle, and his eyes glittered with a fire which changed his whole expression and startled Allan.

"What now?" the latter asked.

"Look at the foremost man!"

"Captain Burdick!"

The Arab did not answer, but his broad breast heaved with emotion and his lips worked almost convulsively. He was fighting a battle with himself—he was trying to resist the almost overpowering impulse to shoot down the man he knew, not as Captain Burdick, but as Carl Rogerson.

Had there been none but men among the fugitives the fate of the valley tyrant would quickly have been sealed, but Ben Ali remembered Carlotta and tried to control himself. It was a hard fight, and as Burdick turned to address his men the spy lost all calmness.

He threw back the hammer of his rifle, and the weapon sprung to his shoulder.

Allan caught the Arab's hand.

"Hold!" he exclaimed. "In heaven's name, what would you do?"

Ben Ali pointed into the gap below.

"I would shoot that fiend to the heart!" he hoarsely replied.

"You are mad—mad! Such an act would be the ruin of us all. Be calm, friend Ali, be calm!"

"Talk not to me of calmness. You do not know that man as I do; you do not know his past acts of villainy."

The speaker wrenched his arm away, and again leveled his rifle, but Allan felt that a shot would be suicidal. He grasped the barrel of the rifle.

"Stop, Ben Ali!" he exclaimed. "Reflect upon what you would do. Remember that the life of a woman depends on our courage and wisdom. You would inevitably draw attention to this vicinity, and the cowboys could not fail to find the entrance to our cave."

The spy lowered the hammer of his rifle.

"I yield," he replied. "Your way is right, though it is hard—come, let us go; I cannot stand here and repress the overpowering impulse to send a bullet through that wretch. Let us go!"

The decision was evidently made with an effort, and Ben Ali shot one more glance down the cliff; then he turned and walked away. Only a few steps had he taken, however, when his massive form suddenly grew more erect, as the deer starts up at a suspicious sound, and then he bounded forward, and, a moment later, stood holding a man in his tenacious grasp.

Plainly, the new-comer had been concealed behind a rock during a part of their stay on the ledge, but he had not been able to evade the Arab's watchful eyes.

One moment he struggled in Ben Ali's grasp, and then, seeing the folly of his course, he remained quiet. Allan saw with some surprise, that the captive was Pollock, his whilom "pard" in the valley.

"So, you were playing the spy?" quoth Ben Ali.

Pollock did not answer.

"Are you dumb?" the Arab demanded.

"Haven't ye a word fur me?" Pollock asked, still looking at Allan.

"You were friendly to me down in the valley," Allan replied, "and I will not forget it. But, Pollock, I am sorry to see you in such bad business as acting the spy for Captain Burdick."

"S'pose I tol' ye I wa'n't doin' it?"

"A falsehood will not help you," Ben Ali sternly observed.

Pollock's eyes glittered, but he did not turn his gaze away from Allan.

"You heerd me, didn't ye?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't ye speak out."

"Why are you here, if not by Burdick's orders?"

"I am hyar by his orders, an' I am one o' ther men he set all along ther mount'n ter see ye didn't escape, an' ter spy on ye. But that don't foller that I'm heart an' soul wi' Burdick, does it?"

"You can hardly expect us to believe otherwise."

"We are not owls," Ben Ali sententiously added.

"An' I ain't so big a rascal ez you think me ter be. I've been in bad comp'ny, an' I've been wild an' reckless, I'll allow, but I'm at the end o' my rope. I've had enough o' Burdick, an' his way o' doin' business. Say ther word, an' I'll leave him an' fight my prettiest fur you."

He spoke earnestly, and as Allan rather liked him, he was impressed by this offer. He seemed in earnest, and, certainly, the addition of a bold, skillful man was not to be despised.

But Ben Ali shook his head.

"Fair words; false heart!" he ejaculated.

"I'm speakin' to Springer," Pollock curtly replied, and then as quietly added: "That is ter say, he knows me better than you, an' I rely on him ter say whether I cast a line with you or not. I'm sick o' them cut-throats, an' ready ter go in an' do my part with you like a man."

He still looked at Allan, and the latter felt that too much responsibility was thrown upon him.

"I am not the spokesman of our party," he answered, "and the verdict must rest with my superiors. I am ready to bear witness that

you impressed me as being the best of the lot in the valley."

"Are you willing to go with us blindfolded?" Ben Ali abruptly asked.

"Any way you say," Pollock cheerfully replied.

Without a word the Arab produced a large handkerchief, which he proceeded to tie over the cowboy's eyes in such a scientific way that there was little danger of his seeing anything. He made the journey cheerfully, talking with Allan, but the latter could see that Ben Ali did not approve of him.

Evidently, the Arab had no faith in his professions of friendship.

He was conducted to the cave, where his advent caused no small surprise, and given in charge of Polk Bruin. It was clear that every one regarded him as an ordinary prisoner, and Hagan audibly observed that, if they could get a few more of the "haythen," they could use them as a breastwork, to fight behind.

Ben Ali, however, motioned Burke aside, and then told his story while Allan listened. Another skeptic was revealed, for Burke glanced at the cowboy with a frown, and Allan felt that he would prefer to be saved from such "friends" as Pollock.

"That's the story," said Ben Ali, in conclusion, "and now it remains for you to say whether the man joins us, or is held as a prisoner."

CHAPTER XXIV.

BESIEGED.

BURKE BRUIN glanced at Pollock as he stood talking with Polk and Lorimer.

"He is not a bad-looking young fellow, and he has muscle which would be very valuable to us if he would use it for us. But he don't come well recommended."

"Scarcely," Ben Ali dryly answered.

"I see your own opinion is against him."

"It is."

"Are you in favor of rejecting his offer?"

"It is for you, not me, to say."

"But I want your opinion."

The Arab hesitated for a moment.

"What I don't like," he then said, "is the fact that the man came to us as he did. Had he walked out, boldly, and offered his services, it would have been different, but he was skulking behind a rock, and evidently playing the listener, when I accidentally discovered him. This is not in his favor."

It certainly was not, and to Allan the argument appeared so sweeping that he could not have said a word in Pollock's favor. Burke Bruin, however, was more careful. The addition of such a man at that time was of great value—if he was loyal—and he did not feel like throwing away an ally.

Without another word to Ben Ali and Allan, he walked over and talked with the deserter.

Pollock answered every question freely, readily, and with the utmost good humor. He made no loud professions of fidelity, but reasserted that he was tired of Burdick and his lawless gang; that he was going to leave them; and that he would like to cast his fortunes with the fugitives and help them out.

"An' I know ev'ry quiet gulch an' canyon in ther mount'n," he added. "Ef you want ter slip out quiet-like, I kin lead you ther safest way."

Bluff Bruin spoke of the circumstances under which he was captured, but Pollock's calm good humor did not suffer any shock.

"That does look bad, don't it?" he said, smiling. "Wal, I've been sneakin' 'round hyar ever sence daylight—Burdick sent me—an' I was on ther ledge when Springer an' this other man come thar. I wanted Springer ter see me first, but Mister Ben has eyes like needles, an' he sorter fell on me like seven thousand feet o' Pike's Peak would, d'ye see?"

"Mr. Pollock, you are a plain man," said Bruin, quietly.

"Plain ez a Injun squaw," the cowboy cheerfully admitted.

"And used to plain talk."

"Rather—sence I went with Burdick."

"Then, if I talk plainly, you will see it's all in the way of business?"

"Lord bless ye, yes. Don't be afeerd o' my feelin's. Spit her right out, Cap."

"I have decided to accept your offer, but I will admit that I am not sure you are sincere. There is, Mr. Pollock, a great responsibility resting upon our shoulders. We have a young woman to care for, and prudence is as necessary as courage. Now, although we admit you as one of us, you must come in as Allan went to Burdick's band—you and he must keep together, as you did there—"

"I see; he's ter watch me this time," airily observed Pollock.

"Yes."

"I'm agreed."

"Furthermore, if you should turn traitor to us—"

"In that case, shoot me, Cap—shoot, an' don't make any bones on't!"

"Pollock, you're either an honest man or a diabolical scoundrel!" Bruin declared. "There's no half-way business about you."

"Just so; I've been all rascal, an' now I'm goin' ter be all on ther squar'."

And so he came into the little party, and the majority of his new companions were rather pleased. Ben Ali said nothing, but it was plain that he did not approve of the new member. Bluff Bruin was troubled by the fact, for he had always relied a good deal on the Arab's judgment, but he had tried to do what was for the best.

Soon after a decision was made, Hagan, who was on guard at the entrance, announced that some of the enemy were in sight. Cowboys were to be seen moving about in the ravine outside, and after a survey of their movements Burke turned to the Arab.

"They are on the track."

"Yes."

"Doubtless they have some good trailer, who has seen our footprints."

"That is my idea."

"I will keep this post for awhile, and challenge them when it becomes clear that they have really found us. Look to our weapons, Ben Ali, and then direct each man to keep his own rifle constantly in his own care."

This was the first result of having Pollock in the cave. Bruin was afraid that he might tamper with the weapons. His presence there did not seem to add to their security, but of one thing the cowboy could rest assured—if he meditated treachery, he had dangerous men to work against.

Burke lay at his post and watched keenly, and as his mind grasped each visible point, he was not surprised to see Burdick ultimately advance with a flag of truce.

The valley chief came quite near, and then shouted:

"Hallo, in there!"

Bruin did not answer.

"You needn't be so cautious, for I know just where you are. My men have used their eyes, and to prove that I know where you are, I will throw this pebble right into your den. See?"

He had picked up a piece of rock, and now cast it so accurately that it fell within two feet of Bruin.

"That's where you are," Burdick added.

"Now, don't be bashful, but speak right out."

He tried to speak in his old, imperious way, but, knowing his own treacherous nature, he was troubled with fear that his flag of truce would not be respected.

"Well," Bruin returned, "what do you want?"

"You've got one of my people in there."

"Whom do you mean?"

"The girl."

"We have the lady here whom we rescued from your clutches. What of it?"

"I demand her surrender to me."

"Of course," Bruin ironically replied, "we only rescued her from you to have the pleasure of returning her at your bidding."

"I understand, but, look here, man, are you bent on committing suicide? We are forty men, hard fighters and strong-stomached. You are not more than four or five. We can sweep you out of that hole in the rocks in short order, and if it comes to that, we will hang the whole of you—every man. On the other hand, if you surrender the girl, you shall go free. There's an offer you can't afford to disregard."

"Captain Burdick, there is need of but few words between you and me. I know you too well to place any dependence on what you say. If we were fools enough to surrender the girl, you would then turn your attention solely to us, attack us just the same, and kill us if you could. Your scheme will not work."

"You wrong me!" cried Burdick.

"Nonsense!"

"I don't know why you should disregard my offers of clemency."

"Well, I do. It's because they are treacherous as Judas."

"Don't insult me, sir!" retorted Burdick, with some of his old fire.

"Then go away. Don't offend common sense by dwelling on your proposal. If you mean fight, go away and set your men on."

"You will be sorry for this."

"That is my business."

"We can sweep you out of that at a breath, and we will do it. If you decline to surrender, I shall storm your position, and put every man to death. 'No mercy!' will be our motto."

"I'm glad you have spoken plainly. Now hear me: If you attack us you will receive a warm welcome. We are here well entrenched, well provisioned, and resolute. We know you to be mere outlaws, and shall treat you accordingly. If you attack us, we shall shoot every man we can draw bead upon."

"Precious few that will be!" Burdick cried. "Why, man, we shall beat you all down inside of two minutes."

"Burdick, we are as safe here as though we numbered a hundred men. I tell you that plainly. More than this, there is a man here who has sworn to shoot you at sight. Only your flag of truce saves you, and perhaps that will soon lose its charm. You had better go!"

The valley chief heard this warning with manifest uneasiness, and he quickly replied:

"I will go, but you'll hear from me again right away. Ruin is before you!"

He turned and went to cover, his movements being more hasty than dignified. Hardly had he reached cover when the cliffs rung with the sound of the discharge of several rifles, and a dozen bullets flattened themselves on the rocks almost beside Bluff Bruin, while others passed his post and whizzed through the cave. He smiled coldly; he had expected something of the kind.

"Every man to his position!" he then directed! "Keep yourselves protected unless the enemy make a rush; in that case, those in the rear cannot fire."

"They are coming," said Ben Ali, quietly.

"Do you see signs?"

"Yes."

"Then make ready, men. We have to deal with outlaws and murderers. Act accordingly."

The truth of Ben Ali's prediction was soon proven. The lull outside was broken, and every rock and recess near the entrance seemed to yield up a cowboy. They sprung out with yells which might have frightened less resolute defenders, and, flourishing their weapons, dashed forward like tigers thirsting for blood.

"They will have it," Bruin muttered. "Fire."

A sheet of flame leaped up in the dark mouth of the cave, and the rocks rung with the discharge until it seemed like the explosion of a magazine. It was a deadly volley, and those who had led the cowboy advance would lead it no more, but the chargers were not checked. Neither was the rain of destruction. The repeating rifles were busy, and at such close quarters they could not fail to do deadly work.

Ben Ali's thoughts were all of Carl Rogerson, and he looked eagerly for that person, but saw him not.

Burdick was not so reckless of danger as usual, it seemed.

One other thing the spy did see; the sound of a revolver directly above his head caused him to look that way for a second. He saw Queen Carlotta, a leveled revolver in her hand, and her nimble fingers were speeding bullet after bullet. Ben Ali smiled grimly and turned to his work again.

But the fight was soon over. The odds soon became overwhelmingly against the cowboys. The defenders' rifles swept the space before them, and the dead fell in the way of the living. Besides, that narrow passage seemed an avenue of death and destruction, and the assailants broke and fled with all the unanimity imaginable.

The first attack had failed.

The defenders looked at each other grimly.

"Who is hurt?" Bruin asked, for bullets had flitted both ways during the fight.

Nobody answered.

"If we have come out of it unscathed we have done well, but I told Burdick we would beat him."

Quietly the speaker directed his gaze toward Pollock.

"I see that you were busy."

"Twa'n't a pleasant thing ter do, but I'm in ther swim, an' I don't back water," Pollock grimly answered.

The men proceeded to reload, while Bruin arose and looked sharply toward the ravine.

"You are exposing yourself to unnecessary dangers," said Carlotta. "A chance that may strike you."

There was no unusual concern in her voice, and Bruin answered in an indifferent way.

"A poor target they would find. However, every man counts now, and I will keep out of sight. I noticed that you used your revolver well."

"I should have been a weak creature not to help defend myself."

"Not so; that is our task. I must ask you to help out the range hereafter. You may be wounded—or worse."

"A poor target they would find."

Burke smiled briefly at hearing his own words quoted, but at once grew grave.

"All may not think thus."

"I prefer to set the estimate on myself, unaided."

It was a curt retort, and she almost immediately added:

"Forgive me! My tongue is always running away with me. Let me not reward your heroic efforts in my behalf with such ungracious remarks. Thank you for your interest in my safety."

"Don't say that, Queen Eagle. They call me 'Bluff' Bruin. Then give me sincere words, be they ever so sharp, rather than politeness of mere ceremony."

He turned abruptly away as he spoke, and Carlotta flushed a little and looked after him more earnestly than usual. His blunt speech had not been without effect.

At this moment Ben Ali announced a flag of truce, and a man appeared and asked permission to remove the dead. It was granted on condition that no more than four men took part, and, the messenger agreeing, the work was done. Burdick evidently had not dared to show himself, but his men seemed to have no fear while the white flag waved.

When the fallen had all been taken away there was a long lull. Bruin and Ben Ali were not at a loss to explain it. The enemy had sustained such an overwhelming defeat when they made the assault that they were reluctant to repeat it, so they were now studying other means of mischief.

The fear that they would discover another entrance to the cave returned to the besieged, and Hagan and Lorimer were detached from the main party and directed to patrol the outlying parts of their refuge, to detect the first signs of danger.

Such signs were first seen in front, however, and Bluff Bruin, who was busy a few feet away, was called back by a summons from Ben Ali. There was excitement, if not alarm, in the Arab's voice.

CHAPTER XXV.

DANGERS SEEN AND UNSEEN.

"WHAT now?" Bruin asked.

"Look yonder!"

"I see nothing."

"Look closer—just between those points of rock."

Ben Ali pointed as he spoke, and Burke saw a gleam like that of moving silver.

"Ah!" he said, "my fear has come true."

"Yes."

Polk Bruin, not in the secret, looked first at the other men and then at the glittering object.

"I see running water," he observed, "but what does that signify. Can it be there is danger in it?"

"There is," Burke replied, "if they have the wit to properly manipulate the scheme, and it looks as though they have. You remember that a good-sized stream runs just beyond that point."

"Ho! I see. You believe they have tapped the stream, and turned on a flow this way, to drown us out."

"Just so, and the whole nature of the ground is in their favor. It must inevitably set up against the front of our retreat, and there will be a pond with the deepest part at our very door."

"That's bad, but can't we fill the entrance with rocks and earth, and stop it?"

"You forget that there are scores of smaller clefts in the rocks and earth. Twenty men, with shovels, could do the work you name. We are seven men, and not a shovel, spade, or other suitable implement do we possess."

All the defenders were soon acquainted with the situation, and all recognized its gravity. If the cowboys had made a success of turning the stream the bowl of the ravine would fill in a few hours, and it did seem that it must inevitably force its way into the cave.

What would be the result of this no one could tell, but it would require time to fill the subterranean abode. If, as they thought probable, there was more than one place of exit, the flood might empty itself as fast as it came in; if not, it must sooner or later fill completely.

In any case there was a reprieve of several hours before any actual danger was to be feared, and, in the meanwhile, they might find some way of escape.

After some discussion it was decided to interpose any barrier at the entrance. The earth was very hard and compact all about, and they had nothing with which to dig it up, and stones could only be had by bringing them from some distance.

Ben Ali, Lorimer and Polk remained to watch for danger; Hagan and Pollock conveyed their few effects to the highest part of the cave, and Bluff Bruin took a torch and went on an exploring trip. If there was another place of exit he wanted to know it. More than this, if he found one, he was in favor of leaving the place that night and making an effort to break through the cowboy lines.

When night fell the only change in the situation was due to the water. Burke and his men had kept out of sight, but the basin in front of the cave-entrance was filled so that the water must soon invade the little party's quarters.

Bruin had held several consultations with Ben Ali which, the others believed, meant something of importance, but no explanation was made.

Suspense continued until eleven o'clock, by which time the water was steadily flowing into the cave. Bruin and Ben Ali viewed it with calmness, however, and no one was much surprised when, at the hour last named, Burke quietly, but abruptly, said:

"We will now leave this cave."

"Have yez found a way out?" Hagan asked.

"I have. A disagreeable, difficult and dangerous way, yet one we must take. All will follow me but Ben Ali."

They followed, still with no clew to his intentions, but all felt that it would be useless to ask questions.

"King Bruin is as much a barbarian as ever," observed Carlotta, who had accepted Allan's arm.

"He is brave and—noble."

Allan spoke the last word with a guilty feeling, for he expected to anger her, but when she turned her head, as she did at once, he saw by

the flickering light of the torch that she was smiling.

"So he has captured you, too."

"I admit that I like Burke Bruin."

"So does every one, until he is well known."

"Allow me to ask what you have against him?"

"Now you ask too much, Mr. Hamilton."

"You and he ought to be friends."

"Excuse me; we ought to be anything else."

"King Bruin clearly desires peace."

"Let him desire. He wishes in vain."

"Miss Allison, you are foolish to rebuff those who would be your friends."

"Mr. Hamilton, you don't know what you are talking about. One thing is clear to me. When, for your sake, I refused to allow you to care for me, when we were in Kentucky, you foolishly followed me here. Your infatuation has vanished, however. You have seen me as leader of a band commonly called outlaws; you have seen that I am hard, bitter and relentless; and that the fair face you once vowed that I possessed, is not an index to my heart. Now, in giving me up, you think of Burke Bruin, and speak for him. Forbear! He and I are as antagonistic as water and fire. We were friends once; we are now deadly enemies. Let it rest at that."

Her manner was earnest, rather than hard or bitter, but Allan somewhat sharply retorted:

"You forget that he saved your life."

"I thanked him. I could do no more then."

"You might have made friends with an honest man."

"You don't know him as I do."

"I think I begin to know you."

It was a pointed, ill-tempered thrust, and as Carlotta's face was at that moment thrown into strong light, he was surprised to see the expression of deep pain that flashed across it. He had not thought her sensitive in any degree.

"Forgive me," he quickly added.

"I will—when you have done me injustice."

King Bruin had paused, and there was no chance to continue the conversation, but Allan could not help adding:

"We are near a second exit. It is along a difficult way, and we shall walk beside a stream which, in many places, forms into deep pools, falls, and rapids. Care must be taken in these spots, or some of us will not get out alive. Do you understand?"

There was a general affirmative, and then the resolute leader provided and lighted two more torches. He gave one to Lorimer and the other to Allan.

"I would advise," he added, addressing the latter, "that you and Polk help Queen Eagle along."

Without another word he turned and led the way down the tunnel where led their course. The waters of scores of years had forced a passage there, cutting a channel through the hard earth, and often hollowing the rocks. The descent was rapid, and though in most places the bed of the stream was half uncovered, at other points they found it difficult to make any progress, and the stream roared along beside them.

Bruin had said well when he stated that "pools, falls, and rapids" would be found in their course, but he had given only a faint idea of the dangers they encountered. In many places a false step meant death.

Carlotta quietly accepted the help of Polk and Allan, but the latter noticed that Bruin often looked back at the girl when the way was most dangerous.

Pollock was following next to Bruin. At the head of a foaming fall he stepped on a treacherous stone, slipped, tried in vain to save himself, and then went headlong over the fall into the boiling pool below.

He was quickly upon the surface, and he struck out boldly for firm land, but the suction of the water caught and drew him back like a flash. It was an experience he could never forget. A perfect Niagara seemed thundering down upon him; his own strength was utterly useless; and he was whipped across invisible stones with a force which sent pain shooting through every nerve.

Out he shot, but the water's grasp was still on him, and he knew that he was going back, to be drawn around and around in that deadly ring. But suddenly some force exerted itself from the opposite direction, and the cowboy found himself lying on the ground.

He looked up, and saw Burke Bruin.

The latter was dripping with water, and it was plain that he had been the rescuer.

Pollock slowly arose.

"I'm a man o' few words," he observed, "but this much I've got ter say. You've saved my life, an' I'll be eternally smashed ef you ain't a brick. You don't lose anything by this, King Bruin!"

"I thought you needed a helping hand."

"I needed it, an' 'twas there, an' by ther howlin' Moses, when you need a lift, *I'll* be thar!"

"Good! Glad I had a chance to help you, Pollock. Mind your way now, all of you."

Greater care was used by all, and in fifteen minutes the outer air was safely reached. Here Ben Ali overtook them, and they were ready for

the last act in the drama. The danger of the subterranean passage was nothing compared to what was to follow.

Bruin looked quietly at Pollock.

"You say that you know the mountain well?"

"I know ev'ry pass an' gully," the cowboy promptly answered.

"Lead us, then, and do your level best. You can depend upon it that Burdick will try to have every point guarded. We must be as wily as the fox. Headlong haste would ruin all; care is vitally necessary."

"I see ther p'int, an' you kin depend on me. I kin outfoot old Burdick on secret paths, an' ef I git ter goin' too reckless, say so, an' bring me up short."

The cowboy gripped his rifle closer, looked keenly around and began the advance. Those who followed looked at each other with mingled doubt, hope, fear and disapprobation. Ben Ali, in particular, felt that it was suicidal to put such power in Pollock's hands. If he was so disposed, he could lead them straight into the hands of the enemy.

Bluff Bruin was not without his doubts, but he felt that it would be a desperate hope for him to try to lead the party through the hostile region. The cowboys outnumbered them greatly, and while every nook of the mountain was known to them, the Bruins knew nothing about the secret ways.

King Bruin's hand was on his revolver, and his eyes were on the guide.

It was a period of keenest suspense. None of the cowboys were visible, but every moment the fugitives expected to see them spring from cover or to hear a shout that would bring the whole gang upon them.

Their progress was slow. Loyal or treacherous, Pollock used great caution, and they wound along the tortuous way in a fashion decidedly serpentine.

Suddenly Pollock stopped, his form became bent, and he peered ahead in a peculiar way. It might be the attitude of a man about to spring upon an enemy, or to run, and Bruin raised his revolver higher and awaited something definite.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOTLY PURSUED.

POLLOCK partially turned his head.

"Thar's a fire goin' thar," he added.

"Where?"

The cowboy pointed, and Bluff Bruin saw a faint light against a neighboring cliff.

"Some o' them is camped thar," Pollock added.

"We must avoid them. Make a detour."

"But things ain't favorable. Ef we keep on hyar we keep in good goin' an' a secret way, but ef we go off thar we shall be exposed, an', I'mafeerd, run onter ther enemy."

Bruin called Ben Ali.

"Remain here with the party," he said, "and use your best judgment. Pollock and I are going to reconnoiter. Don't let any one stray away a foot."

The Arab briefly promised, and Burke and the cowboy glided away. As the latter had said, they had a good path, though one of Nature's own make. It gradually led them to a shelf of rock on the face of a cliff. Above them was a wall of rock a hundred feet high; below was a ravine, and there was the fire.

Bruin peered cautiously over. The fire was burning low, but it was bright enough to reveal several men. All but two were sleeping; the two were playing cards. Of the sleepers, all save one were lying down. He sat with his back to a rock, his rifle lying across his lap.

The light of the fire fell full upon his face, and Burke could not avoid a start. The man was Carl Rogerson, alias Captain Burdick. Everything went to show how demoralized the once-imperious vailey chief had been made by the proximity of the man he feared above all men—Ben Ali, the son of the Orient. The outlaw slept far from the cave, allowing his men the post of visible danger he had hitherto craved, and he only dared close his eyes with his weapons in hand.

Bluff Bruin half raised his own rifle, and then lowered it again. He had greater reason than Ben Ali to loathe and hate the valley chief, and the target was a tempting one, but his habit of self-control did not desert him then.

He turned to Pollock.

"With due care, we can pass here."

"Yes, but ev'ry man must step ez though walkin' on eggs," the cowboy returned.

"We are good for it. Come back."

They went, and the situation was described, Bruin keeping back only the fact that Burdick was with the party, and he laid down the iron-clad rule that no one of the party should so much as look over the edge of the ledge. All must walk close to the face of the cliff, and move with great care.

Once more they advanced, and the dangerous point was soon reached. King Bruin felt that great responsibility rested on his shoulders. He was at once obliged to watch Pollock, to see that he did not run away, and to make sure that Ben Ali did not look over the ledge.

They moved along with all possible care, and

the point of greatest danger was soon passed. They began to draw away from the fire. Bruin was breathing freer, but as he relaxed his watch on Pollock, that person suddenly bounded forward at full speed.

Bruin threw up his rifle, and then lowered it. He dared not risk a shot; the report would surely bring the enemy upon them and destroy their last hope.

Ben Ali saw another way. He too had been watching Pollock, and he sprung in pursuit like an unleashed bloodhound. But he had made a mistake. Before he could overtake the cowboy he saw the latter spring upon some object—there was a brief struggle—and when Ben Ali arrived he found two men instead of one.

"Cover him!" said Pollock, tersely.

"What is it?"

"One o' ther gang, I s'pose."

"You, Pollock!" cried the prisoner. "So you're ag'in us, be ye—turned traitor? That's your style, is it?"

"Never mind, Gregg."

"Burdick will mind."

"Burdick be blowed!"

With this hearty reply Pollock turned to Bluff Bruin.

"This hyar is one o' Burdick's lambs. I seen him ahead hyar, an' feared he'd make trouble. So I dropped onter him."

"You have done very well, and we owe you another. Prisoner, where has Burdick located his men?"

"I won't answer a durned question!" growled Gregg.

"Just as you please, my hearty. You see this revolver, eh? It's rather near your head, and muzzle first, at that. Well, if you try to sound an alarm I shall shoot. You hear me? Now, Ben Ali, tie him up!"

The Arab liked the order, and he executed it with his usual skill. When a gag was put in Gregg's mouth he was completely helpless. He glared at them furiously, but without any effect. He was then stowed away in a convenient niche, and their flight resumed. Pollock had been duly thanked by Bruin, and every one felt more at ease. Their guide had proved his loyalty, and was henceforth to be rated as a valuable man.

They had passed the vicinity where danger was most to be expected, but caution was still used. Pollock chose secluded paths, and all were on the alert for danger. More haste was used, however, for the night was wearing away, and they knew the value of every moment.

It lacked but two hours of daylight when they reached the place where the Bruins had left their horses.

Greatly to their relief they found them undisturbed.

By the previous plans they had a horse for Carlotta, but were still one short; there was none for Pollock. He offered to care for himself in this respect, and overtake them on the trail, but Ben Ali overruled this offer. He said that he desired to look up the horse, and would also act as a rear-guard when he secured one.

Looking at his grim face King Bruin knew what was in his mind. They had gained a point on the enemy, and Ben Ali could no longer control his desire to settle the account with Carl Rogerson.

Reluctantly enough the leader acquiesced, and when the rest of the party rode away, the stalwart Arab remained in the rear like a statue. To what danger he would expose himself Bruin did not know, but he would much rather had him along.

Pollock was again given the lead, though their way was now through an open valley, he knew the ground better than any one else. They rode on in improved spirits, and Hagan and Lorimer even fell into a joking mood.

King Bruin and the guide were riding side by side, and the latter soon evinced a desire to talk.

"Pard," said he, "I've got a confession ter make."

"What is it?"

"When I come ter you, I come ez a traitor."

"With the intention of betraying us, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"But you have served us well."

"Why? Simply 'cause you saved my life when I fell inter ther pool, a bit ago."

"And only for that—"

"You'd never got through alive. Mebbe I'd been killed by you, but I was bound to betray ye. Ben Ali was right when he doubted me. I never intended ter come over ter you, but when I was captured I played my keerds ther best I could. Thar was treachery in my heart all ther time, but you conquered me when you risked your life for mine."

"Why do you confess now?"

"'Cause I'm convinced. Thar is them who would be shocked ef they knew I was such a tough chap as I've been, an' I'm goin' ter turn over a new leaf. I thought ther best way ter begin was ter make a clean confession."

"You are right, Pollock, and I will see that you are rewarded for what you have done. I have money—"

"I won't touch a cent on't," was the sturdy reply. "I want ter help ye through this trou-

ble, fur it'll be a meracle of Burdick don't git at us again, an' when it's over, you an' me will have a talk. Ef you give me leave ter freeze ter you, you'll find me a squar' man; while ef you say 'No,' I'll go my way an' think wal o' you. I like yer style, b'gosh!"

Bluff Bruin doubted no longer, and it was a relief to know just where to place the guide.

They rode on at a brisk pace, and several miles were soon covered.

Day showed no signs of danger, and they rode on at a steady pace. Another hour passed and they began to have strong hopes, but they were dashed to the ground just when the outlook seemed the most promising.

They were bearing around a wooded ridge when a single horseman was suddenly seen sweeping down upon them from the other side. His horse was going at full speed, and Pollock looked troubled, but Burke exclaimed:

"Ben Ali!"

Pollock's face brightened—then grew grave again.

"I'm afraid somethin's wrong."

They all thought so, and they knew it when Ben Ali suddenly made motions which seemed to indicate that they should bear more to the left, and keep on at full speed. They obeyed, and he came sweeping along in the rear.

King Bruin had a definite theory in the case.

The hiding-place of their horse having been on the east side of the mountain, they had necessarily started from there, but Pollock had said that a more direct course would have been to start from the west side. If the cowboys had early discovered their flight, and surmised their course—two chances which had not seemed at all probable—they could have run them down by starting from their valley home.

Anxiously the Bruin leader looked over his shoulder, and all doubts were suddenly removed.

Other horsemen had broken cover, and at least a score were coming at full speed. A chorus of wild yells rose from them, and they swung their rifles and gesticulated wildly.

"Burdick's men!" said Pollock, laconically.

Bluff Bruin looked anxiously ahead. It was still some distance to the nearest cover, and as the cowboys were riding at such speed, it looked doubtful if the fugitives could reach a place of defense. Their horses were put to the best endeavors, however, and the rival parties went over the ground at furious speed.

Despite all, the pursuers gained. Bruin could see them steadily cutting down the intervening distance, and the outlook was not promising. Whenever the cowboys saw fit to use their rifles they could do deadly work. Of course the fugitives could also shoot to kill, but they had no desire to bring on such a skirmish.

Bruin, however, saw that it must come. They could not possibly reach cover, and, despite the odds, they must fight it out on open ground.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE TOTEM OF THE EAGLE.

POLK BRUIN had been looking back uneasily, and he now addressed his chief.

"Wouldn't it be well to cut down their numbers a bit?" he asked.

"It would if we could do it safely, but they would be sure to return the fire, and you know we have a lady here. She might be hit."

"It's pretty hard," Polk acknowledged.

"It'll soon be close quarters, an' ther odds is ag'in us," muttered Pollock.

Still Burke Bruin hesitated, but Ben Ali settled the whole matter. The cowboys had come close enough for him to see that Burdick was not among them; and close enough to make him anxious for the safety of his party. He determined to begin the inevitable conflict at once.

A touch of his hand deviated his horse from a direct course, bringing him partially around toward the cowboys, and then the swarthy warrior threw up his rifle. A report almost immediately followed, and one of the pursuers fell from his horse.

The ball was opened, and Ben Ali did his best to make it lively. Three times he fired, and one more man fell; then he lowered the weapon and dashed after his own party.

The attack stung the cowboys to fury, and a new chorus of discordant yells floated before them. Several, too, threw up their rifles, and the bullets whistled after the foremost party. Ben Ali had doubtless been the target, but he remained unharmed, and the leaden hail came altogether too close to the foremost riders. Burke Bruin shivered, but not with personal fear. It would be a wonder if another volley proved harmless, and—Carlotta was there!

"We will wait no longer," he said, somberly. "Fire, all! Aim at the center of the group, and shoot in earnest!"

The order was obeyed, and though no one fell, it was clear that more than one wound was made. The outlaws yelled even more angrily.

Bruin looked anxiously at the woods, now so close, yet not close enough to promise anything; that it could be made, seemed impossible.

The cowboys were now fully aroused, and they began to shoot more systematically. Ben Ali received a slight wound in the arm, and a bullet tore through Allan's hat.

"There's only one thing to do," said Burke,

glancing at Carlotta. "We will dismount and fight from behind our horses."

"Why do that?" calmly demanded Carlotta, who held a revolver in her steady hand. "If we must fight, let it be with our faces toward the foe, and uncovered. I am in favor of charging upon them in return. Depend upon it, I'll do my part well!"

The warrior queen's eyes were flashing, and Bruin looked at her in admiration, but a shout from Ben Ali drew all attention to him. He was pointing toward the wood, and as they glanced in that direction they saw another party of men riding toward them at full speed.

"We are hemmed in!" exclaimed Allan.

"No!" cried Carlotta, triumphantly. "Look again, and you will not say that. See!—it is the totem of the Eagle!—it is my own band, and Beckett Eagle rides at their head!"

She waved her hand, and a wild, piercing series of cries burst from the new-comers—sounds like the screaming of some monster of the air. It was the war-cry of the Eagles!

King Bruin's face had grown brighter, for he saw victory ahead. The new-comers were the Scarlet Queen's men, and the whole aspect of the case was changed as though by magic.

The cowboys were not to be daunted, and they came on as hastily as ever, but a warm reception awaited them. Beckett Eagle shouted to his men, and then every rifle went up. They were nearer to the cowboys than the latter were to the fugitives, and an excellent chance was vouchsafed.

Their rifles were discharged almost as one, and a terribly destructive volley swept the hostile line. Men went down right and left, and the matter was settled then and there.

One scattering volley they gave in return, but the Eagles were sweeping down upon them, and the late pursuers had suddenly changed to aggressive enemies—it would have been madness to fight it out.

No order was heard among the cowboys, but, as though moved by one mind, they turned and fled. Their greatest desire now was to get back to the valley where they reigned supreme.

Another volley swept their ranks, and the Eagles seemed in a mood for wiping them out of existence, but Carlotta did not feel so vengeful. She saw dead men lying so thickly already that the warrior gave place to the woman, and she signaled to Beckett Eagle to stop the pursuit.

Reluctantly abandoning the chase, her gallant followers came riding toward her at full speed. Bruin and his men paused and stood as passive spectators while the meeting took place.

It was one to thrill an observer.

The Eagles cheered madly, and the name of "Queen Carlotta!" arose above all other sounds. Beckett kissed the hand of their loved leader, and then she shook hands with all the men. This much Allan observed, though, from where they stood, he could hear nothing that was said in an ordinary tone.

Remembering Burke Bruin, at last, he turned to look at him. The mountain king's face was dark and stern, and it was plain that he saw little in the scene to please him.

Carlotta, all kind graciousness to her men, had no good word for him who had done so much for her.

At the end of ten minutes all the Eagles rode toward their allies. The queen was without her official garb, but on her breast showed the token of the Eagle.

She was, indeed, again a queen.

Beckett Eagle led the advance, his honest face beaming with joy. He rode up and warmly shook hands with Bruin and Allan.

"We meet again," he said, "an', by ther hoppin' jacks, I'm glad ter see ye!"

"You come just in time," Burke courteously replied.

"So we did, but whar would our queen been only fur you, I'd like ter know?"

"You would probably have rescued her," said Burke, more coldly.

"Sometime, mebbe, but you got ahead o' me, an' you did a big job. She owes ev'rything ter you, King Bruin!"

Carlotta bit her lips with vexation; then, with a sudden exercise of resolution, she advanced and took up the conversation.

"I do owe all to you, to Mr. Hamilton, and your men. But for your heroic efforts I should have been—I shudder to think what. Perhaps the drugs that wretch was giving me would have made me idiotic. What could have been his motive?"

"That I do not exactly know, Queen Eagle, but one thing I can tell you. Your condition prevented you from discovering one thing you would otherwise have known. Burdick is not the man's real name."

"No? What then?"

"It is Carl Rogerson."

Carlotta started, flushed, then slowly asked:

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"I did not dream this."

"Rogerson is a villain capable of any crime, and it is possible that you begin to realize it. Those who put confidence in him are liable to be deceived."

The remark had more of meaning to Bruin

and Carlotta than the others knew, and she remained silent and, it seemed, uncertain and ill at ease. Her mind went back to that part of her past in which Carl Rogerson had figured, and it gave abundant food for thought.

"But how came he here?" she asked, half-unconscious that she spoke aloud.

"He has followed the natural promptings of his nature, and become an outlaw."

"But—I can't see why he should drug me."

"There is a possible explanation. We have reason to believe that the drug given you was one of Ben Ali's own land, and, if so, continued use of it would have reduced you to a semi-idiotic state. This done, Rogerson could have made you obey his will."

"Even now, I fail to catch your meaning."

"I have no definite theory."

"But you have a suspicion?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I had rather not say."

"I ask you to speak plainly."

"Very well, then; there may be property in the case, which Ryerson desires. By making you his passive slave, he might accomplish his purpose with your help—whatever his scheme is. I don't pretend to say what it is; I don't know."

"And this is the kind of man Carl Rogerson is?"

"Yes."

"Will you accompany my men if we march against Burdick's band?"

Carlotta asked the question with sudden fire in her eyes, but Bruin gravely replied:

"Let me advise you against such a move. The cowboys are greatly decimated in numbers, but they still count as many as we do, and with their knowledge of the country, they could defy us in their stronghold. Very likely, too, they would draw us into some trap and massacre the whole of us."

"That's horse sense," observed Pollock.

"More than this," Bruin added, "I believe that if you do not go to Burdick, he will come to you."

"Pursue us?"

"Yes. He is in earnest, and, moreover, if I judge the wild spirit of his followers correctly, they will demand that he lead them on a campaign of revenge. Let them seek you at Hermit Hump."

"Horse sense, ag'in," put in Pollock.

"Yes, let them come to the Sable Circle," added Ben Ali. "We will be there to receive them!"

Nobody could fail to see that deep significance dwelt in these words. They, and the Arab's manner, implied a good deal, but explained nothing definitely.

Carlotta looked at him earnestly, searching.

"So be it," she said, after a pause. "We will all journey back to the Sable Circle together, and then—well, we will see!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A FAMILIAR FACE STRANGELY SEEN.

ALLAN HAMILTON stood on a shelf of rock, leaning upon his rifle, his attitude that of one in deep thought. The twin cones of Hermit Hump lay, the one at his back, the other a mile away to the front. He was looking across the neutral valley, and up at the rugged fastness where Clan Eagle made its home.

They were all back at the Sable Circle, and the old life had been resumed—at least, it had among the Bruins. Allan imagined Queen Carlotta again wearing her scarlet robe, and proudly bearing the totem of the Eagle, but he had not seen her since their return.

Appearances indicated that he was not likely to; he had not received the slightest encouragement to ever put his foot on Eagle territory again. This gave him no concern; all his fancy for Carlotta had fled.

He told himself that he would soon leave the vicinity forever, but he wished to see if Burdick really attacked, or came near, the clans of the Sable Circle; so he accepted Burke Bruin's kind invitation and resumed his old life with the band.

He had come to be regarded almost as one of them.

On this occasion, however, he was thinking of Ildah Beckett. He had thought of her a good deal of late. Since he gave up all thought of the Scarlet Queen, his mind had turned to Ildah.

He felt that this was weak in him, and not at all complimentary to her, but the recollection of her gentle, womanly, yet bright and arch, ways was such an agreeable contrast to Carlotta Eagle's hard nature that she found pleasure in thinking of Ildah. She, however, like Carlotta, seemed anything but likely to appear to him again.

If the Eagles and Bruins had made a more binding truce, or in any way made up their old feud, Allan did not know of it. Matters appeared to have exactly resumed their old state.

It would, however, take the Eagles some time to make good the loss to their treasury caused by Girdrock's robbery. They still had some of their men looking for him, but he seemed to have vanished entirely after the robbery. That he had worked in company with

Burdick was plain, but he did not seem to have accompanied the latter on the journey to the valley.

Pollock, who had joined the Bruins, had not been with Burdick, and could give no information.

Allan finally returned to the cave, had his supper, and again took his rifle and went out alone. He intended to visit the village and, perhaps, pass the evening there.

He left the Sable Circle and walked along the trail where he had his first introduction to the clans.

When he reached the village he found it as quiet as ever, which was saying a good deal. It existed by the grace of the two clans, and this always seemed to exert its influence; the villagers were not free-and-easy, but seemed cast down by the weight of authority under which they labored.

Allan went at once to the hotel, bought a cigar, lighted it and sat down to kill time the best he could. He had become accustomed to this sort of life, and if his mind had been at ease he might have accepted all philosophically, but he was not able to get in such a mood.

Sitting there with his cigar for company, he looked at his neighbors in order. It was at first an idle glance, but his eyes suddenly lighted up, his attention became fixed, and he looked with anything but indifference.

He had seen a face he little expected to see there.

The discovery surprised him so much that he could hardly credit the evidence of his own eyes, but prolonged scrutiny only served to confirm first evidence.

"Yes; it was a familiar face; the face of Eben Reynolds, the Kentucky lawyer introduced in our opening chapters.

It was, indeed, a great surprise, for Allan would as soon have thought of seeing any other person there. What had sent the prosperous, cold-blooded lawyer so far away from home?

A flood of vague suspicion rolled over Allan. There was a good deal about Carlotta's affairs that he did not understand, and Reynolds, as her lawyer—past or present—must be knowing to nearly everything.

Had Queen Eagle sent for him?

Allan did not believe it. Then why had Reynolds come so far?

"There is a mystery about this whole matter which perplexes me," Allan thought. "Reynolds is a cool, unemotional man, and he would not leave his law practice for any trivial reason. If, as I suspect, he and Carlotta parted in Kentucky with ill-feeling between them, it seems utterly incomprehensible why he is here. I am going to ask him!"

Reynolds had been earnestly talking with his companion, but the latter had arisen and left the room. The lawyer remained in deep thought. Allan crossed the room and sat down at the same table, facing Reynolds.

The latter looked up carelessly, but his mood suddenly changed. He stared at Allan as though he beheld a ghost. The young man bore the scrutiny with an unmoved face, waiting for Reynolds to take the lead.

"You here!" the lawyer finally exclaimed.

"As you see."

"What does this mean?"

"To what do you refer?"

"I did not expect to see you here."

"I can say the same of you," Allan coolly replied.

Reynolds appeared disconcerted for a moment, but he made an effort and recovered his composure in a degree.

"I don't know why I should be surprised," he added. "I remember now that you announced that you were coming here, but I did not suppose you would be so foolish."

"Why was it foolish for me to come?"

"I gave you good advice in Kentucky."

"Exactly—to keep away from Carlotta Allison. I suppose you have come to see her?"

"Providence forbid! I want nothing of her. I am merely traveling."

"Odd that you should bring up at Hermit Hump."

The dry remark did not seem to please the lawyer, and he looked sourly at his companion. Evidently, he was not at all pleased to have met Allan.

"Where are you stopping?" he asked.

"Just outside the village," was the guarded reply.

"Been here long?"

"Off and on, ever since I left Kentucky."

"Have you seen Carlotta?"

"I saw her on horseback once, but not within speaking distance," was the guarded reply.

"Are you cured of your fancy for her?"

"Thoroughly."

"Ha!" said Reynolds, smiling, "it was something of a shock to find that she was only an outlaw queen, eh?"

"Rather, I admit."

"But why do you remain around here?" and the lawyer's face suddenly darkened again.

"I rather like here."

"Have you been down around Leadville, or Crested Butte, or—"

"No."

"There's a country worth seeing. Rich in gold, magnificent in scenery—"

"Spare your eloquence; I have no desire to go there."

Reynolds bit his lip with vexation. He evidently regretted the meeting with Allan very much, and his visible desire to get the latter away redoubled the young man's curiosity in the case. He had about lost all faith in the lawyer's honesty before he left Kentucky, and present appearances indicated that the man had some secret scheme in mind which he did not want known.

"Or would you go to Leadville with me?" Allan added.

"I am too busy at present, but I would soon join you. Suppose you go ahead and make arrangements, and I will follow."

There was eagerness in Reynolds's voice, but Allan leaned forward and looked him full in the face.

"Eben," said he, quietly, "what scheme have you in mind?"

Reynolds started.

"I?" he cried.

"You."

"I have no scheme."

"Excuse me, but I know better. You have come here with a fixed purpose, and you want me off out of the way. You have some plot which won't bear the light of day. What is it? Does it concern Carlotta? If so, you are not working for, but against her. Come, Reynolds, show your hand!"

The lawyer's face had flushed, and he looked at Allan in a very hostile manner.

"You are a meddlesome fool!" he exclaimed.

"Thank you!"

"What is my business to you?"

"Ordinarily, nothing, but you have shown such a desire to get rid of me that I want to remain. I am going to remain, and if you force me to it, remain as your enemy."

"Be careful!" almost hissed Reynolds.

"What would you do?"

The lawyer's answer was not ready, but he sat like one choked by his own emotions, and the younger man calmly added:

"There are bravos about here who might be hired to do bloody work, I dare say, but I notify you that I carry a full list of weapons, and am able to protect myself. Also, I have strong friends here."

"You have joined Carlotta's band!" Reynolds exclaimed.

"Wrong—I have not."

"I don't believe you."

"It is immaterial to me whether you do or not. Enough to say that I am here, and going to remain for a time, and that I shall keep my eyes open."

Reynolds sat in sulky silence.

Allan continued to watch him and he was surprised to see a sudden gleam come into the dull eyes—a look in which alarm had some part. The lawyer had been looking beyond his companion, and as he now made a peculiar motion, as though waving some one back, Allan wheeled around in his chair.

There were several men in the room, some seated, some standing, but Allan at once caught sight of one particular person who, standing twenty feet away, was looking at him fixedly.

It was a familiar face, but to save his life Allan could not have placed it at once. Who was the man? Where had he seen him before?

Suddenly the man turned and made for the door, but as he did so the light of recognition flashed upon Hamilton. He knew at last where he had seen that face—it had been in Captain Burdick's valley retreat.

Allan sprang to his feet. If one of the cowboys was there it might be the advance Bluff Bruin had prophesied—it certainly meant mischief—and Allan determined to act promptly. He would accost the outlaw at once.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SHADOWS OF COMING EVIL.

THE cowboy made good use of his time and disappeared through the door, but Allan was not far behind him. The pursuer passed out, but looked in vain for Burdick's man. Where was he? The night was dark, but it did not seem that he could have gone beyond sight in so short a time.

Allan turned the corner of the house. Still no sign of the man he sought, but there were numerous small buildings near where he might have gone.

"He saw and recognized me, and has really made a run of it," Allan thought. "Well, that doesn't signify so much as does his presence here. That looks bad. As Bluff Bruin prophesied, Burdick is still active; one, at least, of his tools is here, and there is no knowing how many more are about. Queen Eagle must know of it."

By this time he had given up the search, and he started back toward the hotel. As he did so he remembered how his attention had first been called to the cowboy.

A significant look—a more significant motion—on the part of lawyer Reynolds.

"By George! it is plain that Eben knew the

man. I'll see what he can do in the way of explanation."

He re-entered the bar-room; Reynolds was not there. He had disappeared, suddenly and completely. Allan walked up to another person who sat near.

"Did you notice the man with whom I was talking a few minutes ago?"

"Yes."

"Where is he now?"

"Why, didn't he go out with you?"

"No."

"Well, he come mighty near it. He went out just after you; I noticed him in particular. Say, Hamilton, who is that old fellow?"

"An Eastern man—a lawyer."

"Humph!"

"What do you know of him?"

"Well, he's been around here a couple days, and talks about the cattle trade a good deal. If he's a friend of yours I don't want to offend, but it's my opinion he don't mean any good."

"What do you suspect?"

"Nothing clear, but I can size up a man some and I tell you that fellow's got an idee in his head; and not an honest one, either."

"I don't see much chance for him to operate a nefarious scheme around here."

Allan stopped short, and his companion's answer fell on heedless ears. He had suddenly remembered that signs went to show that Reynolds was acquainted with one of Burdick's men. A good deal of evidence wheeled into line with this fact. He had gathered from what King Bruin had said that Burdick was, really, named Carl Rogerson, and was an old acquaintance of hers.

Moreover, Bruin claimed that Rogerson had a deep plot against her, and it was expected that he would make another effort to abduct her.

Now, Reynolds, Carlotta's lawyer, but not her friend, was on the ground, and, certainly, acquainted with one of Burdick's followers.

Did not all this point to a scheme against the Scarlet Queen, in which Burdick and Reynolds were allies?

"Carlotta must know of this!" Allan thought.

"She shall not go without a warning, and, in return, she ought to let me into the mystery of the case. There is some old drama in which she, these two men, Bruin and—yes, and Ben Ali—played a part. What was it?"

It was useless to speculate, but he became more than ever anxious to see Reynolds again. He found that the lawyer was not in his room, and then he made an effort to find him. For an hour he alternated short trips outside with visits back to the bar-room, but Reynolds did not appear.

His prolonged absence seemed to weigh heavily against him; he had seized the first chance to evade Allan, and had then taken care to keep out of his sight.

At the expiration of the time named Allan had decided to put into effect a scheme he had been revolving in his mind for some time. Late as the hour was, he determined to go to the Eagle cave and see Carlotta.

He started at once, and, as he went, fastened upon his breast the totem of the Eagle, given him on a former occasion. This would be his safeguard while in the northern half of the Sable Circle.

He reached the staked line without adventure, and began the ascent of the mountain.

He was toiling upward when the rattling of a loose stone on the ridge above caused him to pause. Some one was astir, and he did not care to run upon any person until he learned who it was.

The unknown came down slowly, as was natural; it was not safe to move rapidly there in the dark.

Their voices became audible before he saw them, but they finally emerged from the night-shadows and advanced almost directly toward him. There was something about the party which perplexed him, and he was glad when they paused near at hand.

At first Allan had thought that they bore some burden; now he imagined that they were helping along an injured comrade.

A rough voice broke the silence.

"You needn't play the baby-act any more. You've got to go with us, whether or no."

"Then you shall carry me every step!"

It was a woman's voice—Allan made a sudden start. Who had spoken? Not Carlotta, yet the voice was very familiar. Who was she, and who were her companions? Some peculiarity of the place made all their voices sound strange.

"Play the vixen, will you?" cried the first speaker, angrily.

"So you name me anew."

"I only wish you were my prisoner, and I'd show ye."

"You could not frighten me, even then. You are four men against one weak woman, but I can tell you that I am not afraid. You are! Ruffians are always cowards and only cowards would act like you!"

The spirited retort caused the unknown man to swear roundly, but it did more. Allan knew the girl, at last—he recognized the voice of Ildah Beckett. Instantly a fire of indignation leaped through his veins. The estimable daugh-

ter of the Eagle lieutenant had fallen among enemies, and no friend seemed to be near—none save Allan.

He quietly drew his revolver, determined to give the fellows warm attention, disastrous though it might be in the end to him.

"You'll get your free tongue curbed pretty soon," declared the leader of the gang.

"By you?"

"No; by Girdrock."

"Girdrock!" cried Ildah, scornfully. "He is the biggest coward of all. He hides in a hole like a prairie dog when the danger-signal is flying, but is very brave when he has a crowd of men at his back—to make war on a woman!"

"Tell this to him, not to us."

"I will tell him, but one thing I have to say to you. You are meddling where you will get hurt. Those who serve under the totem of the Eagle will give you a lesson you'll never forget."

"Bah! the day of the Eagles is over!"

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"How do you make that out?"

"Wait a few hours, and you will see. In this world it's a see-saw business. A goes up, B is down; then up shoots B, and A drops with a crash. A new power is at work around Hermit Hump, and the Eagles and the Bruins, and the old landmarks, will be swept out of sight and existence. They'll vanish as did Herculaneum and Pompeii. When that time comes, it would be well for you to be on good terms with Girdrock."

"Girdrock! I hate him!"

"He loves you."

"I don't want his love!" Ildah cried. "I know him of old. He was always the craven of the band, and always annoying me. I hate him! As for you, you'll get yourself into trouble by obeying his orders. The Eagles—"

"Always the Eagles! I am tired of it. Have I not told you their day is past? But why do I waste time arguing with a silly chit of a girl? Come on; we must finish our journey."

"I will not go further. I will call for help—"

"Call, if you dare."

And the kidnapper pressed his revolver against her head.

Affairs had reached a crisis. From the first Allan had determined to go to her rescue, great as was the risk, and he had only delayed because he hoped to be enlightened by the conversation. What he heard had implied a good deal, but nothing definitely.

Now, decisive action could not be delayed.

With a quick, strong bound he gained the side of the leading abductor, and, before that person realized his peril, the rescuer brought down his clubbed revolver with full force.

It fell with unswerving accuracy, and the man dropped to the ground.

Consternation seemed to seize upon the other men, but as only one assailant appeared, their courage came back. Allan realized that he had undertaken a big task to whip four men, and he also knew the value of prompt action.

No sooner had the first man fallen than he flew at the others. A clubbed revolver is an ugly weapon, when wielded by a strong arm—the kidnappers now had evidence to this effect.

Allan struck out right and left, and his blows told every time, but the other men were not long in recovering their wits and courage.

"Thar's only one man—knock him out!" cried one of their number.

"There are more coming," shouted Allan, determined to try an experiment. "This way, boys—this way! Death to the abductors! Come on, Eagles!"

It was a good attempt, but he had to deal with men not to be frightened by shadows. They had set upon him in a body, and, despite all his efforts, he was driven back. Up to this time he had hesitated to use his revolver, but he hesitated no longer.

A big ruffian was towering above him, his hand upraised for a blow, and Allan pulled the trigger. In vain! Just as he fired his arm was knocked aside, and in a moment more the big fellow's hand was on his throat.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE INVADERS COME!

ALLAN saw his life in peril, and he rallied to meet the emergency. When his big assailant struck his arm aside the fellow had evidently forgotten all about it, but Allan did not. Quickly he brought the revolver back, and with the muzzle almost touching the unknown's body, he pulled the trigger.

A cry—a fall—and he was rid of one enemy.

But now the others assailed him more hotly, and the case looked dark again. Allan's revolver was knocked from his hand, and though he struck down one man with his clinched fist, the remaining two bade fair to soon put him beyond fighting.

Suddenly, however, a new, strange, thrilling sound broke upon Allan's ears. He recognized it at once—it was the wild war-cry of Ben Ali's native land; 'twas the Arab, himself, who had uttered it.

Allan quickly sent forth the Bruin's battle-cry; then, redoubling his efforts, he drove his

assailants back once more. But his strength was going.

There was a rush of heavy feet—a repetition of the wild cry—and then the Arab spy broke upon the scene like a cyclone. Resistlessly he sprung at the outlaws, and they faded away like chaff. One went down in a heap, and a second disappeared over a ledge as Ben Ali projected him through the air with his strong arms.

The field was won.

There was no more fighting to do, and Allan, leaning against a rock and panting like a hard-run stag, was glad it was so. He had had enough of fighting, though his courage was as good as ever.

Ildah hastened to his side.

"Are you hurt—wounded?" she cried.

"I think not."

"Oh! I wish I could have helped you, but my hands were tied. I thought they would kill you, and my heart is all a-tremble now. You were very brave to come to my rescue."

She spoke rather incoherently, but showed a regard for Allan which so pleased him that, when he had released her hands from the cords, he kept them imprisoned in his own broad palms.

"Who would not be a hero for your sake?" he returned, and other speeches, more pleasant than practical, followed, until Ben Ali interrupted them.

"Time is passing," said the spy, "and we may see more trouble, if we are reckless. Young woman, who were those men? Can you tell?"

"I know only one. The others were strangers—in invaders of the Sable Circle. That one was Girdrock."

"Ha! is he back?"

"Yes; and he tried to steal me."

"Explain!" said the Arab, with a frown.

"These men abducted me, but Girdrock led them. He accompanied us half-way down the mountain, and then went away."

"What was his object? Were you mistaken for the Queen of the Eagles?"

"No," Ildah replied, curtly; "that ruffian of a Girdrock professed love for me—he has said the same thing before, when he was one of the band—and, this time, he said he had taken me away to save me from the destruction which menaces the rest of the band."

"Again the vague threat!" Allan exclaimed.

"There is mischief afoot."

"What do you mean?"

"I won't try to explain now, but will make all possible haste to notify King Bruin and Queen Eagle. I was on my way to see the latter when I ran upon your abductors. I will now conduct you home. Ben Ali, do you go with us?"

"No."

"Are you homeward bound?"

"Yes."

Then tell Burke Bruin that it will be worth his while to sit up until I return, and hear my story at once.

Ildah thanked the Arab warmly for his share in her rescue, and he answered with grave kindness. Allan did not stop to look at the condition of the fallen kidnappers, but, leaving Ben Ali to do with them as he saw fit, started up the cone with Ildah in charge.

For the time being he forgot the vague clouds which he believed hovering over Hermit Hump, and was happy in the society of Ildah. Beyond question, Beckett Eagle's daughter was a charming girl, and to Allan she was all the more interesting because, while thoroughly intelligent, she lacked the fine superficiality of women of the world.

The Eagle cave was reached in due time, and the quiet which existed there showed that Ildah had not been missed. They passed the man on guard, and Ildah went at once to Carlotta, bearing Allan's message.

She soon returned, and said that the queen would see him immediately.

Allan found Carlotta seated like a real queen, robed all in scarlet, except that the totem of the Eagle showed in white relief at her bosom. It was a picture which would have dazzled him a few days before, but his mind was now more securely anchored.

She received him graciously.

"I did not expect this visit, but you are welcome," she added.

"I have come simply on business, and as the bearer of news which may prove unwelcome," Allan gravely replied.

"News? What is it?"

"First of all, Eben Reynolds is at the village."

Carlotta's brows contracted.

"Reynolds! Why is he there?"

"That I don't know. I tried to learn, but he evaded an explanation, and, at the first opportunity, actually ran away. More than this, at least one of Burdick's men is also at the village."

"This is news, indeed," Carlotta admitted, and her expression showed that she did not regard it lightly.

"Even more than this, there are signs which go to show that Reynolds and Burdick's man are working together on some scheme."

"The plot grows darker!" murmured the Scarlet Queen, like one who speaks aloud unconsciously. "Mr. Hamilton, I see that you are the bearer of news. Will you kindly tell all that you know?"

Allan complied, and gave as accurate a description of his experience as was possible. It was a story which plainly surprised Carlotta, and the thoughtful frown did not leave her forehead.

"You do right to call it a mystery," she said, "and it is that to me, though I can probably see plainer than you. Lawyer Reynolds is in Hermit Hump village, and the friend of at least one of Burdick's followers. They have something to conceal. Ildah's adventure proves, I think, that more of Burdick's men are near here. They talk mysteriously about a new order of things; about the breaking of the Eagles' power. What does all this mean?"

"Danger to you, I should say."

"And war against the Eagles?"

"Yes."

"Let them come!" said the queen, scornfully. "Why, an army could not defeat us here, or take our cave. That is impregnable to all except artillery."

"You forget the gold-laden soil of the Sable Circle."

Carlotta started.

"Ah! here is a new idea."

She meditated for a moment, and then her hands clinched and her eyes flashed.

"Let them come, if they dare! I will say frankly to you that the ban of the Sable Circle has heretofore been one of empty show. We warned all outsiders off, and they kept away through fear, but we should never have harmed honest intruders seriously. But if Burdick plants his ruffians in the Sable Circle, we shall make good our threats. It will be war to the knife!"

"And I hope to fight under the home banner."

"You will be very welcome to clan Eagle."

Allan felt that time was precious, and he did not delay long at the cave; he wanted to see King Bruin, and let him know the state of affairs. His band might also be menaced—certainly Burdick had cause to hate the Bruins after what had occurred in, and near, the valley.

Leaving Carlotta, he hastened to see Bruin. The latter heard the story without excitement, and almost in silence. When it was told he dryly observed:

"New developments may be in store for Queen Eagle."

"I suppose it would be asking too much if I suggested that I would like to know something about that—to me—mystic past which now casts its shadow—"

"Hamilton, you would be no wiser, no happier, if you knew. It is not an agreeable subject. Let us drop it."

Bruin spoke kindly, but there was a ring of authority to his voice.

"Very well. Now I'll retire."

"Let me thank you heartily for your news, Hamilton. If I haven't said much, it is not because I am indifferent. Thank you for the news. Ben Ali will probably soon be in, and then he and I will consult. I will see you in the morning."

Allan left the chief with the impression that the latter was less at ease than appearances indicated; also, that he took a pleasure in the union of Reynolds with Burdick.

"It probably goes to prove some point he wishes to make—a connecting link, as it were, with the past. Well, it's his affair, not mine. I'll go to bed."

He did so, but that night his rest was broken by wild dreams in which Reynolds, Burdick and the clans of the Sable Circle figured strangely.

He arose early, anxious to see what the night had brought forth, and as he entered the main room of the cavern, he saw the Bruins pouring out of the other end in some excitement. He joined them, and addressed the nearest man:

"What's the disturbance?"

"They say thar's a sight fur our eyes out yon," was the reply. "Come an' see!"

Allan followed.

The Bruins were collected on an elevated point of the ground, and Allan could see Burke and Ben Ali at the front. All were looking down the side of the cone. He did the same, and one glance was enough to show the cause of excitement.

During the night a tall flag-staff had been erected on a ridge, and from this floated a banner which an old-time pirate might have coveted; and grouped around the flag were a hundred men, who were neither Bruins nor Eagles.

Yet they were inside the Sable Circle!

The invaders had come!

CHAPTER XXXI.

WARNED TO LEAVE.

THERE was no such thing as misunderstanding the scene before them. There were not only interlopers in the Sable Circle, but they had come in force. They had not come to dig gold secret-

ly, but boldly, with a force sufficient to defy the original inhabitants—at least, they had defied them.

The flag—which was, as has been said, of the piratical order, being a black ground-work with a death's head and cross-bones in white—was planted as near as might be on the line between Bruin and Eagle territory, and the men grouped about it were also on both claims.

Clearly, both clans were defied by the invaders.

When it was remembered that Burdick's outlaws were doubtless of the party, it made a stirring scene. For a long time the totems of the Bear and Eagle had reigned absolutely, yet peacefully, at Hermit Hump, but the scene had changed.

These invaders had plainly come prepared to fight to the bitter end, and their numbers made their flag anything but a burlesque. It had not been selected and raised without due thought; they were prepared to maintain their right to fly a piratical banner.

There were warm scenes ahead for the Sable Circle.

Allan pushed his way toward King Bruin and Ben Ali. The common men had given them room by themselves, but Allan was not in a mood to respect the dignity of office. He went to Bluff Bruin's side.

"So it has come," he observed.

"They have come!" was the grim reply.

"Have you just discovered them?"

"Ben Ali discovered what they were about, hours ago."

"And yet you let them work on?"

There was some surprise in Allan's voice, but Bruin calmly answered:

"I was perfectly willing, but this does not mean that I am going to let them stay there. We have hitherto kept interlopers from the Sable Circle by mere threats. Now, if it comes to that, I can set to work with right good will and fight this gang with lead and steel. We will have breakfast."

The abrupt change of subject seemed out of place, but Bluff Bruin's word was law there. The clan returned to the cave and ate their morning allowance. Nobody knew whether their leader had a good appetite, but in a short time he came out of his private quarters, fully armed.

"Polk Bruin will accompany me," he said, looking at the men, "and, also, Hamilton, if he wishes."

Allan did wish it, and the three soon left the cave. King Bruin made no explanation, but it was generally understood that he was going to interview the invaders. Their piratical flag was still flying saucily, and men seemed as thick as bees.

Burke, boldly wearing the totem of the Bear, strode down the descent, and his companions followed closely. Their movements were promptly observed by those below, as signs indicated, but there were no evidences pointing to a hostile reception.

Despite this, Allan was not sure it would be the reverse. Burdick had reason to hate them bitterly, and he would not scruple to lay a snare and massacre them if he believed such a course to his interest.

Boldly the Bruin King advanced until only a hundred yards separated them from the other camp, and then, as three men were seen coming forward to meet them, they paused.

"One of the three is Eben Reynolds," Allan announced.

"And another is Girdrock," added Bruin. "That's a fine pair. The third is a burly ruffian unknown to me—he is probably taken along to match us in warlike ability."

"Burdick does not show himself."

"He's mighty careful not to do so. He fears for his precious life, yet I will wager something he does not get away from Hermit Hump alive."

Conversation ceased as the other trio approached. Reynolds, cold, crafty and observing, led the party, and nodded easily as he came to a halt.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," he said.

"You're in new business, Eb," said Bruin, bluffly.

"As you see."

"Given up the law?"

"For the time being."

"That's where you made your mistake. You will find more law in the Sable Circle than Kentucky ever had."

"We propose to have the benefit of that law—"

"You shall—fully, practically, convincingly. Here the law of might and justice prevails, and I hold the reins of power. It is absurd to suppose that I need explain the state of affairs to you. The Bruins and Eagles rule here, and no outsiders are wanted."

"That's all very well, Leonard Bruce, King Bruin, or whatever you call yourself, but you must understand that you don't run all creation. There are hundreds of acres of land inside this line of black stakes you have driven, and that land is free to all."

"Wrong; it is free to no outsiders."

"Outsiders are here, are they not?" Reynolds coldly asked.

"At present, yes; but if they don't get out, they will suffer for it."

"Spare your threats, sir," the lawyer retorted. "We are here with one hundred and twenty-five men, and we shall fight to maintain our rights."

"Humph! Whom do you mean by 'we'?"

"Mr. Girdrock, Captain Burdick and myself lead the party."

"I know Girdrock. He robbed the Eagle treasury, and then ran away."

"I've come back," snarled Girdrock, flushing a little despite his brazen impudence.

"And Burdick," pursued Bruin; "where is he?"

"He is not well to-day, and—"

Smiling grimly, King Bruin interrupted:

"He is sick with a coward's complaint—fear. He does well to keep out of sight, but this will not save him. Eb, it looks suspicious for you and Carl Rogerson to be in partnership."

"We will not argue that point."

"No? Well, just as you say. One word I have to say for your benefit. Did you see the sign warning intruders away from the Sable Circle?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you heed it?"

"Because we defy you. We have come here with the power of might to secure our share of the gold of Hermit Hump. We are going to stick."

"That makes your position plain. Now hear me! You will not remain here. I don't know where you gathered all your men, but Burdick and his followers are mere ruffians, even as they are outlaws. Against such men we shall not hesitate to act decisively. Unless you retreat from the Sable Circle we shall attack you with bullet and steel, and drive you away."

"Whenever you see fit, try it!" Reynolds retorted.

"Are you in earnest?"

"Yes."

"And willing to meet bloodshed?"

"Yes. If we are molested, we shall shoot to kill."

"That settles it. I don't propose to spend all day here talking to you, but will sum up in a few words: I give you twenty-four hours to consider the matter. If you are not gone then, we shall attack you!"

So saying, King Bruin wheeled and strode away, followed by his men. The lawyer made some retort which sounded like: "Attack, and be hanged to you!" but Bruin did not once look back.

His eyes were busy, however, and a grim smile suddenly passed over his face. He had seen another party advancing, and, seeing Beckett Eagle at their head, he surmised their errand. He shaped his course to meet them, and soon greeted the lieutenant.

"Out on business?" he added.

"I'm a-goin' ter order them chaps off," answered Beckett, with a sour manner in contrast to his usual good nature. "Jedgin' by 'pearances, you've been out on the same errand."

"I have."

"What answer did they make?"

"Burdick, Reynolds, Girdrock & Co., refuse to leave."

"They do, eh? Wal, they'll git some forcible help ter leave. Do ye know, that pison skunk o'a Girdrock dared ter steal my gal, Ildah, last night, an' she was only saved by this young man's 'aid.' Jest let me git at Girdrock onc't, an' thar'll be somebody hurt."

"No clew to the gold Girdrock stole?"

"Not a clew."

"Humph!"

"Say," Beckett continued, "I'm goin' down ter see them chaps, an' order 'em off. O' course they'll refuse ter go, same ez they did ter you; an' arter I come back, I want ter see you ag'in."

"I'll wait here—unless you object to having me on Eagle territory."

"Not at all; ther time hez come when we can't be fastidius."

Beckett looked gloomily at the piratical flag as he spoke. There was, indeed, a decided change at Hermit Hump.

The lieutenant went down and was soon in consultation with Reynolds. The interview was a long one. Beckett, older than Bluff Burke, honest, good-hearted and opposed to fighting, evidently made a strong plea to the lawyer, but he came back unsuccessful.

Then he and Bruin had a long private talk. The result of it was that Polk and Allan were directed to return to the Bruin cave, while Burke went with the Eagle lieutenant. Their way was straight up the north cone, and in due time they reached the home of clan Eagle.

Beckett left the distinguished visitor with a subordinate, and disappeared in the direction of the Scarlet Queen's quarters. He returned in a few minutes to say that she would see Bruin.

The latter entered the room of state with uncovered head, yet he was even more erect and stern than usual. This proud girl had called him a barbarian, and many more severe names, and his pride was equal to hers.

She was reclining on a luxurious couch, clad

in all her scarlet and white finery, and Bruin would have been a clod had he been blind to her beauty.

He did not know that she had carefully prepared for the interview.

She arose, greeted him, motioned to a chair, and then resumed her former position. There was a brief, almost awkward silence, and then the matter-of-fact voice of Beckett Eagle sounded.

"Wal, we're hyar ter find means o' oustin' them invaders, an' I'll let you two set in jedgment on ther case. Go ahead!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

A TIME FOR DESPERATE MEASURES.

CARLOTTA calmly replied:

"I see but one way—to drive them off."

"They have six-score men," observed Bruin.

"Well?"

"Have you enough to oust them?"

"We number forty at present. The odds are against us, but with such men as the Eagles, and with Lieutenant Beckett to lead them, they can accompiish wonders."

"That's all right," broke in Beckett, "but you surely wouldn't want them all killed in their fight, would ye?"

"I certainly should not."

"Wal, I tell ye fairly that ef we put forty men ag'in' a hundred an' twenty-five, we won't hav many left arter ther fight's over."

"Speak out, Beckett Eagle," Carlotta somewhat impatiently said. "Don't beat about the bush."

"Wal, ther long an' short on't is, King Bruin an' me hev been talkin', an' we allow two loaves is better than one. Ther invaders are on both Eagle an' Bruin s'ile. Now, why shouldn't we chip in ter drive 'em off?"

"In plain words, you favor a union of the Eagles and Bruins, to fight the common enemy?"

"Yes."

"And you, King Bruin?"

"The advantages of such a step are many. Neither of our bands can, unaided, drive the interlopers off, without sacrificing many valuable lives. Whether it could be done at all I do not pretend to say. Three to one is somewhat of an odds in a battle. United, however, we have over two-thirds as many as they."

Carlotta toved with the tassel of her robe several seconds before she answered. Both men watched her, and Beckett Eagle's face grew grave. Was it possible that she would decline to make the alliance?

"I believe," she said, at last, "that our bands decided some time ago to be enemies."

"Something of the kind occurred," Bruin admitted.

"Was there reason for such a step?"

"It was taken, anyhow," was the grim reply.

"I see no reason to reverse our step?"

"But, great Goliath!" cried Beckett, "be we goin' ter set idle, an' see them Burdick outlaws gobble up our gold?"

"No. We will drive them out."

"With forty men?"

"Yes."

"Somebody else than me kin lead 'em then!" grumbled the veteran.

"Who asked you, sir?" demanded Carlotta. "Why am I at the head of clan Eagle, if I cannot do my share of the work? When the battle-cry is sounded I shall be among those who wear the white totem—I shall lead my men!"

The warrior queen sat erect and, drawing a sword from a convenient resting-place, flashed it in the light until a thousand silver rays seemed shooting across the room.

Beckett Eagle, however, was far too practical to appreciate the heroic element of the situation.

"Great Scott! be you crazy?" he demanded.

"Sir?"

"It ain't ther place o'a woman ter be whar bullets fly. You said a bit ago I was ter lead ther Eagles; now, you say you'll lead 'em. You'd better take counsel o' wisdom, jine our force ter Bruin's, an' let him lead ther hull lot. He kin do it, an' handle 'em all ter a charm."

"Lieutenant Beckett, you forget yourself!" Carlotta exclaimed.

It was the first time there had ever been the shadow of a quarrel between her and the sturdy lieutenant, and it pained them both more than any one could guess; but the Scarlet Queen had taken her position deliberately, and Beckett's praises of King Bruin brought a deep flush of anger to her face.

It was another victory for Burke.

"Spare yourself talk on that subject," curtly interrupted the Bruin. "I decline to lead any but my own men. Furthermore, if Queen Eagle does not favor the combination, we need talk no more."

He arose as he spoke, but Carlotta made a quick gesture to stop him, and rapidly said:

"Do not go yet, if you please: I have more to say. I do not want you to think me blind to the advantages of union, or so stubborn that I will not unite with a band led by you. I have another reason."

"Indeed! May I ask what it is?"

"I decline to have you risk your life, and those of your men, in a quarrel which belongs purely to the Eagles. Only for us this trouble would never have taken place, and it is our place to drive out the invaders. Girdrock and Captain Burdick were originally the disturbing elements. The former robbed the Eagle treasury, and now wants more dishonest wealth. Burdick abducts me, and, as Reynolds confessed to Beckett, his cowboys are to avenge their fallen comrades. They told Burdick he must lead them here, or resign. All this trouble lies at my own door; it is my place, aided by my band, to settle it. It would be rank injustice for the Bruins to expose their lives for us."

She was so evidently sincere in this argument that Bluff Bruin's face relaxed, but he was not so ready to yield the point.

"Surely, it is the place of the Bruins to drive away the intruders on their territory."

"Not when the Eagles—or, rather, Carlotta Eagle—was the cause of their coming."

And she persisted in this argument despite all the two men could say. She took all blame to herself, nor would she admit the truth of what Burke urged—that it was the greed of the invaders alone that brought them there.

A sign from Bruin caused Beckett to yield at last and the two men went outside.

"Don't hurry this point, lieutenant," said Bruin. "The case is far from hopeless; I think she will yield. She is sincere in her anxiety to save the lives of the Bruins; let her see that if she persists in her course she will sacrifice all her own band."

"It may work, for she loves ther Eagles like ther apple o' her eye."

"Give her time. Conduct her outside; let her see that villainous flag floating down below. Arouse her devotion to the Eagle clan; remind her of every instance of *their* devotion to *her*. In a word, try to make her see as she should."

"I'll do my best," Beckett replied, but his answer was not confident.

He accompanied the visitor outside the cave. The odious flag still fluttered in the breeze over the invaders' camp, and Beckett shook his fist at it in mute wrath. Then the two men shook hands, and Bruin strode down the side of the cone.

"A true man, ef Carlotta is ag'in' him, I do b'lieve!" the lieutenant muttered. "Don't I wish she'd agree ter a union?"

He lingered several minutes, watching the piratical flag and the hostile camp, and then went inside. As he entered the main cavern-chamber he stopped short in surprise. An unexpected scene was before him.

All the men were assembled, and Carlotta, clad in her richest robes of state, was seated in the great chair devoted to her use. Usually, when there, she had Ildah and one other "maid-of-honor" beside her, but she was now alone.

She was evidently on the point of addressing the men. Beckett listened.

"Men of clan Eagle," began the warrior queen, "you all know that there are intruders on our territory—outlaws and thieves, whereof Girdrock, the traitor, is one of the leaders. I believe you all feel the disgrace of the situation, and, perhaps, you see the deeper disgrace in store for us if we let these men have their own way. Do you suppose they will be content with the gold they can dig from the ground? No; Girdrock knows there is more gold in our treasury, and he will urge the outlaws to steal it. They will try; they will succeed, unless they are stopped short."

"They're goin' ter be stopped short," interrupted one of the band.

"Good! I am glad to see such a spirit among you. Now, I maintain that these wretches are contaminating the soil of the Sable Circle. They poison the air they breathe. Such a thing shall not be, and the sooner they are driven out, the better. They must be driven out at once. Men, are you ready to sweep them away?"

"Yes!"

The Eagles shouted as one man, and they clearly meant all that they said.

"Good, again. I thought I had not misjudged your spirit. Prepare for the work then. I go with you, and I shall lead the attack. I am not at your head as a mere cipher, for I am prepared to fight by your sides. I will lead you, and we march within the hour!"

She spoke impetuously, but there was a noticeable hesitation among her followers.

"Wouldn't it be well ter wait until dark?" finally suggested one of them.

"Why should we?"

"That's ther prudent way, when ther odds is ag'in' us."

"Are you afraid to follow where I lead?"

"No."

"Be ther Bruins ready?" asked a second man.

"The Bruins! What have they to do with us?"

"Ain't we an' them ter join hands?"

"No."

"I heerd that Bluff Burke was here fur that purpose."

"He did not come and make the offer," Carlotta admitted, "but I declined it. We work alone in this matter. The quarrel is one in which the Bruins have no part. We owe this

invasion to Girdrock, the deserter from our band, and Burdick, the man who kidnapped me—your queen. Surely, this is wholly our quarrel, and it is for us to settle it. Will we call upon the Bruins in this necessity? Never! Let us fight our own battles. Don't you say so, men?"

The warrior queen had endeavored to instill her own enthusiasm—real or feigned—into her followers, but her face fell as she saw how her address was received.

Utter silence reigned for a few moments, and then a voice broke the silence.

"Do you advise takin' our forty men, an' attackin' their hundred an' twenty, or thirty?"

"What Eagle would be afraid to try?"

"Can't say ez ter that, but one thing is sure. I ain't in favor o' suicide, an' I don't believe ther rest o' ther lads be. Ef we Eagles tackle them alone in broad day, we shall all be killed. You admit that King Bruin suggested a union. Why did ye refuse? Eighty odd men is better than forty. I'm in favor o' accepting Bruin's offer!"

Queen Eagle's face grew white with anger. Her dearest hopes were in danger of destruction; the band threatened to rebel!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ON THE WAR-PATH.

BECKETT EAGLE had but little sympathy for the queen then. He, like all the rest, thought that Bluff Bruin's proposal ought to be accepted, and he had but little respect for the reason Carlotta had given for declining aid.

The Scarlet Queen glanced at the group of faces before her, but saw encouragement nowhere.

"Allow me to ask," she said, somewhat tartly, "who is queen here?"

"You be," the spokesman readily admitted.

"And I have a right to give an order, have I not?"

"Yes."

"Well, it is my desire to attack the invaders."

The spokesmen shook his head, and replied in a grave, argumentative tone:

"But, Queen Eagle, consider the case—"

"I have considered!" Carlotta sharply interrupted.

Her follower's eyes flashed, and he suddenly drew his form more erect. He angrily cried:

"An' so you want ter send ther Eagles down thar ter be butchered, do ye?"

More signs of rebellion were vouchsafed, and the queen did not see a sympathetic face. A severe reply trembled on her lips, but the last speaker suddenly turned to his comrades and spoke again:

"Boys, be we goin' down thar like cattle?"

"No!" they shouted.

"Do we object ter bein' slaughtered."

Almost every man emphatically replied in the affirmative, and the spokesman turned to Carlotta.

"You see, Queen Eagle," he added, with both politeness and respect. "Ther boys don't want ter march ter certain death. I hope you'll forgive us, fur we ain't turned ag'in' ye—not by a good deal—but when we see ye goin' ter suicide, we have ter cry a halt. I hope ye won't blame us too—"

"Say no more, Gordon Eagle," Carlotta replied. "You need not excuse your course, for I am not inclined to dispute your right to do as you please. One thing is sure, however; I am not the person to be at your head without authority. I hereby resign my position as queen of the clan."

There was no severity in the words—on the contrary, there were tears in her eyes and her voice trembled.

Her announcement fell with startling force upon the ears of her men. She had ruled them as no man could have done—by the power of love—and no other person could fill her place.

"No, no!" cried Gordon. "Don't do that!"

"It is said, already."

"But you don't mean it."

"I certainly do."

"Boys, be we goin' ter allow this?"

"Never!" the Eagles shouted, and other cries of like nature were freely added.

"You have no choice," said the queen, more firmly. "I am not going to be a cipher on a throne. I resign, and you can find some one else to fill my place. I shall direct our Supreme Lodge to make out my financial statement, for I shall leave the band as soon as possible."

She arose as she spoke, to leave the room, but Gordon Eagle interrupted:

"Hold on, Queen Carlotta—hold on! We ain't goin' ter allow this. We won't allow you ter resign."

"There is but one alternative."

"What's that?"

"While I am queen I will be obeyed."

"Haven't we obeyed you?"

"The test has now come," Carlotta steadily replied. "Are you, or are you not, prepared to attack the invaders as I have directed?"

Silence followed the question. The "test" was a severe one, and every man there felt that it would be madness to obey her, while, on the

other hand, it would be a positive affliction to lose her as a queen.

Gordon began to argue the point, but she cut him short.

"Enough!" she said, firmly. "You now have my ultimatum. Either I am to be obeyed as your leader, or I leave the clan, at once and forever. If I remain with you, then we are to attack the invaders as I have said. I give you two hours to decide upon your course. Come to me then, and the matter shall be settled."

At the last words she swept from the room, and the Eagles were left alone. They looked at each other in silent dismay; it was the worst complication they had ever been called upon to face. What were they to do?

The appearance of Beckett Eagle promised relief, and they crowded around him for advice.

"I ain't got a word ter say, boys," he asserted. "I've heerd all, but I ain't givin' advice. Settle it among yerselves."

And despite their protests he sat as silent as a statue among them, while they discussed the matter and tried to arrive at a decision.

Carlotta, in the meanwhile, went to her private room and dropped the curtain, which showed to all that she was to be disturbed only for some important reason. She sat down and fell into deep thought, but it seemed to prove painful. She soon arose and began to pace the room with quick, nervous steps. Some unpleasant subject seemed to occupy her mind, for her whole manner was that of one ill at ease.

At times, too, she seemed on the point of tears, but her strong nature carried her through.

At the end of forty minutes a messenger appeared from the band. He bore a slip of paper upon which was written this brief communication:

"Does Queen Eagle mean that she commands her men to attack the invaders, without aid from the Bruins, and that, if they refuse, she will abdicate?"

Carlotta promptly drew her pencil through the word 'commands,' and wrote above it, "directs." This done she added one line on the margin of the paper:

"This is precisely what she means."

The messenger disappeared, and Carlotta smiled faintly.

"How stupidly shrewd they are! This was only a move on their part to see if I was weakening. I hope they have found out. But do I hope they will weaken? I don't know!"

She spoke the truth. Beset with contradictory emotions, with doubts, fears and uncertainties, she knew not which way to turn. She looked with skeptical eyes on everything, and on nothing more than her own judgment.

But at last came the answer, brought by Gordon Eagle and two others of the clan. Their faces were very grave, and it was clear that they took little pleasure in seeing her.

"The clan," said Gordon, abruptly, "have decided ter agree ter your proposition on one condition."

"And that?"

"Is that you wait till night afore makin' the attack."

"Humph! The Bruins may get ahead of us."

"I don't believe they'd be sech big—"

"You might as well go on, Gordon. But never mind. So the men agree to follow me to the attack, to-night?"

"Yes, Queen Eagle."

"Let it be so; tell them I agree. Where is Beckett?"

"In ther main chamber."

"Did he take part in the conference?"

"No. He set by an' said never a word. He vowed that he wouldn't put in his lip."

"Send him here, please."

Gordon disappeared; Beckett came. The lieutenant's face was as grave as his predecessor's had been, but he saluted the queen as though not a cloud had ever marred the harmony of clan Eagle.

"Have you heard Gordon's report, Lieutenant Beckett?"

"Yes."

"What do you think?"

"I've gi'n my opinion, an' now that it's all decided, it would be decidedly ongrateful fur me ter say more."

"Will you fight with us, to-night?"

"I b'long ter ther band, an' while I wear ther totem I foller whar they go."

"But you don't approve of the plan?"

"No."

"May we not, by means of a surprise, rout them?"

"Ef they're ter be taken by surprise, they are bigger fools than I take them ter be."

"Is this your actual opinion?"

"It is, Queen Eagle."

Carlotta walked twice across the rock-bound chamber before she spoke again. Beckett watched her with close attention. He was inwardly praying that she might change her mind, though he hardly expected it. Finally she stopped before him.

"Will you see to the preparations?"

"Ef you wish."

"I do. Let every man go armed to the teeth, but, otherwise, unburdened by anything."

"Shall you leave a guard here?"

"Certainly not. We want every man we can muster. Let the whole clan go, and the women will show you that they can form a garrison."

Beckett was dismissed with a few more orders, but he went out with a dissatisfied look on his face. There was much about her plans which he did not like, but she was even more fixed and stubborn than usual.

Night came, but several more hours were allowed to pass before the band left the cave. Carlotta insisted on leading the attack, while Ildah and the other women had announced themselves willing to remain alone in the cave.

They did not apprehend danger from this.

At last the band went forth, but though they were well armed, there was not a sanguine person among all the men. They expected disastrous defeat, and, to tell the truth, relied more on their legs than their weapons when the crisis came—provided they had a chance to run.

The great danger was that they would be hemmed in and butchered to a man.

Down the cone they slowly and carefully toiled—along the ridge—and then down, still down, toward the invaders' camp. And so they came within a hundred yards of it. All was quiet there, and the enemy seemed sleeping, but the piratical flag still floated defiantly.

Carlotta was not as calm as she could wish. Now that the crisis was at hand she found herself mentally asking what right she had to attack these men. Her claim—the claim of her clan—to one-half of the Sable Circle was a lawless one. What right had they to attack others who came there to dig gold? True, Burdick and Girdrock—known ruffians—led the invaders, and the outlaw cowboys were there, but, possibly, there were honest men, too.

Queen Eagle shivered, but it was too late to turn back.

The die was cast!

She gave the word, and the Eagles crept cautiously forward. The more ground they could cover unseen, the better. Perhaps, after all, they could surprise the invaders. No sentinels were to be seen. The breastworks thrown up during the previous day were to be seen, looking grim enough, and behind them they would find the enemy, asleep or awake.

Which? That was the great question.

Forward crept the Eagles, with Carlotta still at their head. They began to hesitate. This silence, this passive delay on the part of the defenders, was not natural. The Eagles feared that it heralded the worst. Was a line of men lying behind the breastwork, waiting to slaughter them?

Even Carlotta was alarmed by that ominous silence, but she would not turn back. Instead, they determined on prompt, decisive action. She gave the order, and the Eagles started at full speed.

A brief space of time would show them what was behind the earthworks—would show whether life or death awaited them there. They reached the intrenchments—they sprung to the walls of rocks and earth—they leaped over and were in the enemy's camp.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE WARRIOR QUEEN'S DILEMMA.

As the Eagles entered the intrenchments each and every man utilized all his lung-power in a tremendous sound, a cross between a shout and screech—in other words, they sounded their clan yell.

And as the sound rung out on the air they expected to find the whole space before them swarming with foes. Each rock, and bush, and log, was expected to contribute several outlaws, but though every Eagle held an upraised weapon, not one saw an enemy to attack.

They paused, and utter silence fell upon them. They were in the invaders' camp, and the piratical flag waved above them, but that was all there was there except the empty earthworks.

The camp was deserted!

"What does this mean?" Carlotta asked, somewhat in awe.

"Wal, it seems they've skipped."

"Got skeered an' left the Sable Circle."

"Don't you be'lieve it!" exclaimed Beckett Eagle, with great emphasis. "They didn't come hyar jest ter run away ag'in. In my opinion, we'd better git back ter ther cave ag'in."

Every eye was turned upward to where the north cone rose tall and grim against the sky. A startling possibility occurred to them. They had left the cave unguarded, and all the clan's gold there—though it had been newly concealed—and nobody knew what was occurring there at that moment.

"The enemy may be near here," Carlotta suggested.

"They ain't. Ther deserted camp speaks fur itself. They're gone, an' I tell ye that is mischief in ther air. They've gone ter attack either our party or ther Bruins—an' our women are alone!"

"It shall not be said that I am indifferent to them," replied Carlotta, "and though I believe

the invaders are nearer to us than to the cave, we will beat a retreat. You are at liberty to return, men!"

The Eagles did not wait for a second command, and it was something surprising to see how suddenly they disappeared. One minute they were there; the next, the invaders' camp was again deserted. All the men were hurrying up the mountain-side.

Carlotta would have been left in the rear, but Beckett Eagle kept at her side and gave her his arm.

"Why don't you keep up with the men?" she asked.

"My place is by ther queen," he sturdily replied.

"You may be needed at the cave. Go!"

"We will both go tharaway."

"Beckett Eagle, you are nervous, alarmed, in constant fear for your loved one. For Ildah's sake, you must hasten home. I command you. Go!"

He hesitated no longer, but bounded away like a mountain sheep, swift and sure of foot. Queen Eagle was again in the rear, but not greatly so. She was as used to hard work on the mountain as any of the band, but she did not see fit to hurry then. She easily kept the rearmost Eagles in sight during the ascent.

She grew encouraged as they went on nearer and nearer to the cave and no alarm came, but it was a delusive calm. She was just thinking that the foremost of the Eagles ought to have arrived at home when, suddenly, and with startling clearness, the report of a rifle rung out on the night air.

It brought Carlotta to a sudden halt. It had sounded from near the mouth of the Eagle cave, and, situated as affairs were then, it might mean a good deal.

But it did not come alone. Another shot followed it—then a third—then a half a dozen in succession. Clearly, the Eagle van had found the enemy.

The Scarlet Queen quickened her pace to a run, and hastened toward the quarter of fighting. A terrible fear was in her mind, and as she went she panted in a way not the result of physical exertion. But, suddenly, the Eagles who had been at the front came rolling back in general, but orderly, retreat.

"What is it?" cried Carlotta. "Beckett Eagle, are you there? What is wrong?"

"It is just ez I expected," the lieutenant hoarsely answered. "Ther enemy hez outwitted us ther wu'st way, an' they now hold ther cave!"

Carlotta's face blanched, and she pressed her hand over her heart like one in extreme pain.

"Is this true?" she gasped.

"True ez preachin'."

"The invaders have captured our cave?"

"Yes."

"And—and Ildah?—and the rest?"

"Pris'ners, o' course!"

Beckett spoke curtly, and, having finished loading his rifle, he looked toward the cave-entrance with a ferocious scowl new to his honest face.

"Have you tried to enter?"

"Rather. Ef it was light you could see ther blood drippin' from my finger-tips. They shot close, but hang me ef I didn't shoot closer. I'll sw'ar I bored ther man who hit me."

"And you are wounded! Let me attend to—"

"No; 'tain't no more than a scratch; an' that is work fur me ter do. Tain't long ago that Girdrock stole Ildah. He is ther now, o' course, an' he'll claim her. I'm goin' ter enter ther cave, some way."

"Reflect. Such an attempt would be fatal—"

"My gal is ther—do you s'pose I'll tamely leave her with that devil of a Girdrock? No; I'll die in tryin' ter save her rather."

Beckett was strangely unlike himself—rude and harsh—and Carlotta felt a rebuke implied in every word he spoke. He referred to Ildah, and it metaphorically made Queen Eagle's heart bleed. She loved the girl as much as Beckett did, and shivered to think of the outlaws' reigning there, with Ildah among them.

"I will go and speak with the invaders," she quietly said.

"No; it'll be death ef you do. They won't allow a soul ter approach; I defied ther warnin' an' got a slug through my arm. Keep you back, Queen Eagle."

"I shall do as I said."

"What?"

"Speak with them at once."

"Lord love ye, they'll fire upon ye at sight."

"So be it then; I shall try, just the same."

"Now this won't do. You're a woman, an' fur you ter march up ther an' be shot like a wolf—in the dark they can't tell man from woman, so you'll git no mercy—why, sech a thing is too horrible to think on!"

"Horrible or not, I shall make an effort to speak with them. Say no more, Beckett Eagle; I absolutely refuse to hear you. Let me alone!"

It was not an angry, harsh or imperious command, but it was so inexorably firm that the lieutenant saw the folly of opposing her further. Indeed, she did not give him a chance; she at

once started alone for the cave-entrance, and when Gordon would have accompanied her, she ordered him back.

Once more the Scarlet Queen was the victim of circumstances. She felt that she, alone, was to blame for the trouble which had overtaken Ildah and the rest of the women. Had she not taken the mountaineers away from the cave, all would have been well.

Now she told herself that her first, her most sacred, duty was to help Ildah, and she was going about it in her usual rash, Quixotic way. Not for a moment would she scruple to expose her own life in such a work.

But she bade fair to sacrifice herself without helping Ildah.

Straight toward the cave-entrance she went. It was a mad undertaking; the invaders were watching there, and they had announced that they would shoot any Eagle at sight. Certain death seemed to await the rash young woman.

She had gone within a hundred feet, or such a matter, of the entrance when a flash of light was followed by the whistling of the bullet past her ears. The danger had opened.

If Carlotta was frightened she did not allow the fact to become apparent, for her voice arose at once, clearly, unfalteringly.

"Wait one moment, if you please. I am Carlotta Eagle, and I want to speak with Eben Reynolds."

There was a lull in proceedings; her boldness had clearly taken the enemy by surprise, and they were not ready to meet her advance. At last came the answer:

"Who is there?"

"Queen Eagle, and no one else. I want to speak with Eben Reynolds."

"I am here," replied the lawyer's well-known voice. "What do you want?"

"I want to know what you propose to do here."

"I will gladly tell you, my dear Carlotta. We decided some time ago to have this cave if we could get it. We came here to-night, and, as you were out, visiting, we secured the said cave very quietly. Now that we have it, we propose to hold it against all comers. We are a hundred and twenty-five bold men—hard fighters, none-too-squeamish bordermen. This cave is now ours, and we will allow no one to enter. Whoever tries will be shot down at sight."

"One word, sir. You have prisoners."

"There are a few women here, I think."

"I ask you to surrender them."

"And we decline. We need just their number to do our cooking, washing and similar work. We shall hold them."

"Eben Reynolds, have you no mercy?"

"Not any great amount."

"You have one prisoner who is my friend. Release her, and you shall be left in the cave unmolested."

"Who is the woman?"

"Ildah Beckett. She is—"

"No use, Miss Allison. The girl is the prisoner of Lieutenant Girdrock, and he would not part from her for a mint of money. Release her! No, no; we can't think of it."

"Eben Reynolds," cried the unhappy queen, "have you turned your back on all that is honorable, safe, and lawful?"

"Very nearly that. From this time on, gold is my all—my food, drink, breath, ambition, life."

"I will give you a thousand dollars if you will release Ildah."

"Ha! ha! Don't I know that all your money is inside this cave? You haven't a dollar elsewhere. Your gold shall be mine anyway. And now, Carlotta, go away. If you should talk here until the sun grows cold, you would accomplish nothing, and I am immediately going to leave this point. You would waste breath by talking more, and after the lapse of one minute the guard will shoot whoever is in sight. You had better go away. Good-night!"

The last words showed that the ex-lawyer was in retreat, and Carlotta took his advice so far as going away was concerned. But she went with drooping head, and she suddenly cried out in bitterness of spirit:

"What shall I do now? Ildah is doomed, and I am to blame for it all. Would to heaven it was I thus in danger, but it is Ildah—darling Ildah! What, oh, what shall I do now?"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE PRIDE OF A QUEEN.

The night wore away without further adventurous incident. The Eagles made the best of their situation, and camped in the adjacent canyons, guarding against surprise by means of pickets, who watched to see that the invaders did not steal upon them.

These pickets were not the only members of the band who passed the remainder of the night without sleep. Beckett Eagle was in consultation with others who, like him, had female friends in the cave as captives. They sought for a way to rescue them, but their plans were not hope-inspiring.

Carlotta had retired to a recess in the rocks,

and there, by her own command, she was left alone. Whether she slept, no one knew.

At the first sign of dawn she appeared, and asked Beckett to send out hunters. All the food was in the hands of the invaders; they must look elsewhere. Game was still to be found in the hills, and a passable breakfast was provided.

After it was eaten, Carlotta summoned the lieutenant.

"I am going to the Bruin cave," she said, quietly.

"Indeed!" was all Beckett could answer.

"Yes; and I shall leave you in command here. Take what precautions you wish, and dispose of the men as you think best. I leave all to your judgment."

"I'll do my best; but you don't mean you're goin' ter see ther Bruins alone, do ye?"

"I am going alone."

"Why not take Gordon Eagle, or—"

"I want no one. Do not mention it, Beckett, simply wait near here until I return."

The lieutenant opposed her plan no further. Her mood troubled him not a little. He saw that the loss of the cave was preying on her mind, and though he was in an agony of fear for Ildah, he found time to pity the queen. She had made a serious mistake, and its consequences were far-reaching, but, now that the first shock was past, he was again a loyal follower.

Carlotta left the band and started south. Her face bore a firm expression, but her manner was more subdued than usual. She had learned that the rank of queen was not all a path of flowers, and it may be her confidence in her own ability as a leader had received a shock.

She had barely passed the neutral valley when she was accosted by a picket who wore the totem of the Bruins. It was Polk, and a few questions developed the fact that the Bruin cave was guarded on all sides.

Burke had left no way open to the invaders to surprise his force.

Polk kindly bade her pass on, and she again advanced. It was the first time she had ever trod the south cone's ragged side, and as she thought of all her bitterness toward the clan she sighed. Time had brought great changes, and her spirit was nearly crushed.

She soon encountered another Bruin, who addressed her with great respect, and then he promptly offered to guide her to the chief. If she had been more at ease she might have suspected that her way had been made easy by some thoughtful mind.

She was soon in the presence of Bluff Bruin.

He was at all times a plain man, and neither his room nor his dress had the air of royalty affected by Queen Eagle when at home. The simplicity of all his surroundings was in keeping with his character of a bluff, practical man.

He arose, bowed politely, gravely, and at once addressed her.

"You are welcome to the home of the Bruins, Queen Eagle. Will you be seated?"

She obeyed quietly.

"I have come to see you on business, King Bruin."

"I shall be pleased to listen."

"Do you know what occurred last night?"

"No."

"The cave of the Eagles is in possession of the invaders."

"Ah! I feared something was wrong. I kept a good force of pickets out all night, and they reported firing somewhere on the north cone. Did they take you by surprise?"

Carlotta told the story of the night in plain, forceful terms, not sparing herself an iota. The loss of the cave was all due to her wretched judgment.

"This is bad," commented Bluff Bruin, sympathetically, "but it is better than to have lost a number of your men."

"You forgot that all the women, save myself, were captured, and are held prisoners."

"I had overlooked that."

"It is because of them that I have come to you, King Bruin. Do you clearly see how I am placed?" I have tried to direct the Eagles, and every thing I have done has been a mistake. I had plenty of good advice, but I disregarded all. My first mistake was in refusing the alliance you proposed; my second was in trying to make the night attack. I stupidly left the cave unguarded, and it was lost. The invaders are now in possession of that, of our women, and, if they can find our gold-dust—which we buried since Girdrock's robbery—they will have all for which my hand has toiled for years. This, King Bruin, is the punishment of a willful, headstrong woman. I acted against everybody's advice—you see the result."

Pitilessly the queen arraigned herself, but her manner would have been calm had not a despairing vein run through all that she said.

"You should not take such a gloomy view of the case, Queen Eagle. We are all liable to make mistakes—"

"Do not try to excuse me. Optimism is out of place now; I am willing to face the truth—the hard, discouraging truth. Let me tell you why I have come here. I have been proud, imperious—possibly unjust. Whether I wronged you in the past, I certainly have done so during

the last few weeks, when you would have held out the olive branch. I was proud and disdainful then, for I thought myself powerful. I was a queen with a clan at my back. Now that misfortune has come I am like many others. I am anxious for the help I refused when I thought myself so far above need of help. This is a pleasant part of human nature, is it not?"

Implacable as ever—sparing herself not an iota—placing herself in the worst possible light—yet through all maintaining a kind of calmness; that was Carlotta Eagle at this stage of affairs.

"I must protest against such an arraignment of yourself, Miss Allison. We all make mistakes—"

"What was you doing last night when I made my mistake, and ruined all? You remained in your cave, threw out many pickets, and took great care not to be surprised. Don't try to excuse me. I am in the dust, and not at all squeamish about acknowledging it. Now, don't add that you pity me!"

"I am only sorry you won't do yourself justice."

"I am going to do myself justice," Carlotta grimly replied, "and to this end I have come to you for help—to you, whom I have wronged and insulted ever since we came to the Sable Circle. King Bruin, from this time I surrender the leadership of the Eagles—I am no longer their queen—and I humbly ask you to undo what my folly and incapacity have wrought. Will you save Ildah Beckett and the other women from the invaders?—will you now make the alliance with Beckett, leader of the Eagles, which the former queen, Carlotta, refused?"

If Bluff Bruin had ever held resentment toward the Scarlet Queen, his hour of triumph had come.

She was, indeed, humbled to the dust. All her pride was cast aside, and she was before him in mere supplication.

Knowing her as he did he must have also known to what her pride had been subjected to humble it. He had thought that she could not bend, and she had not—her pride was broken.

But if he felt one grain of satisfaction, it did not manifest itself in his strong face.

"I propose," he answered, quietly, "to drive the outlaws out of the Sable Circle."

"That is one thing, but my request points to another. In my anxiety for Ildah Beckett, the invasion seems a small affair. What I want to know is, now that I am no longer queen of the Eagles, will you take command of both clans and rescue the women?"

Bruin looked at her with an expression she could not fully understand.

"There is a condition and a consequence which must follow my acceptance."

"And they?"

"The condition is that, while I have nominal command of the united clans, you will retain your place at the head of the Eagles."

"And the consequence?"

Bluff Bruin's face grew dark.

"If I win," he said, in a deep voice, I shall make an important capture. Eben Reynolds and Captain Burdick—Carl Rogerson—will fall into my hands. If they do, I will have confessions from them, or—well, I will show them!"

Carlotta's gaze searched his face doubtfully, uneasily, hesitatingly.

"Confessions of what?" she slowly asked.

"The truth!" replied Bruin, and he folded his arms across his chest and looked at her with a world of power and resolution in his dark eyes. "I give you fair warning that if they do confess, you will be shown that all your resentment against me and against the Bruces has been unfounded—in a word, that you have wronged me."

Carlotta's face paled perceptibly.

"I hope you will secure justice."

"And what if I can clear the name of all who are named Bruce?—my own, my father's."

"I shall be glad."

A sudden fire shot into King Bruin's eyes.

"And then you—"

"I shall congratulate you and say good-by. As soon as Ildah and her companions are rescued, Carlotta Eagle will disappear forever. Yet, I say that I shall be glad to see you cleared, for it only needs that to show me that every act of my career has been wrong, unjust and—"

"Stop!" commanded Bruin. "You must do yourself justice. You were told plausible stories by—"

"By scoundrels whom I ought never to have believed."

"Carlotta," cried Bruin, eagerly, "do you freely say that now? Do you say it without proof?"

"I will say that in my heart I believe that I have been wrong; that I have wronged you. I hope you can prove it."

His face was the personification of happiness, and he moved toward her with extended hands.

"Then let our enmity be buried, now and forever!" he exclaimed, but Carlotta waved him back.

"Not so," she gravely replied. "Your innocence may be proven, but my own sins remain to be atoned for and forgiven!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BLUFF BURKE TAKES CHARGE.

KING BRUIN looked at Carlotta in surprise.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Don't you understand?"

"Not fully, for—"

"Well, I have been stubbornly opposed to you since we came to Sable Circle, and this has made all the mischief. I refused to make alliance with the Bruins, and the result is the present state of affairs at the Eagle cave. I can find no words strong enough to describe my folly, nor can I forgive myself. I am under a ban until this is atoned for."

"But this need not interfere with a settlement of what preceded our coming to Hermit Hump," Bruin argued.

"You are wrong; it must interfere. Do not urge me further. Let this matter rest for the present. It is best so."

"It shall be as you say, and I thank you for what you have already said."

Carlotta had abruptly risen. She took no notice of his last words, but quietly observed:

"I am going back to the Eagles."

"With your permission, Polk Bruin and I will accompany you. I want to begin operations at once."

Carlotta did not object, and Burke first consulted with one of his men, and then he and Polk made the return with the queen. When the Eagle camp was reached, it was found that the situation had not changed.

Beckett's face grew wonderfully bright at sight of Bruin, and when he heard that an alliance had actually been made, he looked even more delighted. He had great faith in the stalwart king of the Bruins. Barbarian or not, he had a long head and undaunted courage.

The two proceeded to discuss the situation. The invaders held the cave with a force one-third larger than that of the combined clans, and the nature of the place was such that it would be mere suicide to attempt an assault.

As for starving them out, that was out of the question. There was an abundance of food in the cave.

There were two entrances to the cave, but neither was of such a nature as to encourage the besiegers. They could not be taken by storm—that was certain.

"What are we ter do?" Beckett asked, dismally.

"Our first step," Bruin calmly replied, "will be to send to Beaver Trail for dynamite."

Beckett's eyes grew unnaturally large.

"Is that ther scheme?"

"That's one of them, but it may be two weeks before we can get the dynamite here. Again, if we were to use it, we run the risk of killing the women in the cave."

"Good heavens! so we do! We mustn't use it!"

"Rest assured, I shall not use it recklessly, but I am going to send for it, just the same. In the meanwhile, if you know of a place where the upper wall, or roof, of the cave promises to be thin, we will endeavor to dig our way in."

"That's a slow way."

"Do you know of a quick one?"

"No. You're right, ez you usually be. Thar's system in your plan, an' ev'ry Eagle is ready ter take pick, crow-bar, spade or what-not, an' wade in."

"What of their water-supply?"

"Thar's a big spring right in ther cave."

"It can't be cut off?"

"No."

"Then, at present, no way of getting at them suggests itself but to dig in—if necessary, to make so many breaches that they can't defend them. How many able-bodied men are there in the village?"

"In ther village? Prob'lly twenty. Why?"

"We must enlist them."

"Great Scott! we can't."

"I think we can. They have always made money out of us, and though they called us outlaws, we have been good citizens and kept away the Indians. This new gang are outlaws with a vengeance, and it means ruin to the village if they get control here. Trust me, when I've talked with the villagers, they will come in a body to help us."

"You're a Napoleon ter plan," quoth Beckett, "an' ef you kin induce them villlage chaps ter enlist under our banner, I'll sw'ar you're a Cicero fur eloquence an' persuasion."

Bluff Burke smiled faintly, and then added:

"I will now address the men in the cave. I must appear and show a white flag, but my faith in them is not strong. I want you to post ten men so they can command the cave entrance with their rifles. If the enemy fire upon me, let every one of your ten men shoot into the entrance, whether they see a living target or not."

"I'm afraid you'll be shot."

"I'll risk it."

Bluff Bruin prepared a flag of truce, but before moving forward, he talked with Beckett again and made further arrangements. Polk, too, was sent back to the south cone with definite orders.

Then Bruin moved forward.

He fully expected to be at once fired upon, and it would be a wretched marksman who would entirely miss at that distance; but, somewhat to his relief, there was only a brief delay before Eben Reynolds appeared with a flag.

The old lawyer smiled grimly.

"So you are there! I expected this. The Eagles and Bruins have laid down together like lambs. That's all right, but they will do well to keep a goodly distance from the lions—"

"Just now our attention is directed to wolves and hyenas," Bruin coolly answered. "Are you leader there, Mr. Attorney Reynolds? Where is our old friend, Rogerson?"

"Captain Burdick is not well, and I appear for him."

"It's mighty odd how some men take sick when there is danger, ain't it, Eben?" was the sarcastic retort. "Well, never mind; you will do as well. Few words are necessary here. You and your men are trespassers on the premises of the Eagle. The bandit clans want you to leave."

"Are they in a hurry?"

"Yes."

"They can wait until their hurry is over."

"They *can*, but they *will* not. Unless you evacuate the cave you will be driven out, and bullets will not be held back. It is leave or fight."

"We prefer to fight. Run your men forward as soon as you see fit; we are ready."

"You must be a fool to suppose we are going to march our men up here to be shot. There are better ways of getting at you. Unfortunately for you, you don't know all the ways."

"You forget that Girdrock is here."

"I forget nothing. I am glad that villain is there; we will have a settlement with him. So you absolutely refuse to surrender?"

"Certainly."

"Then let your men keep out of sight. We shall hereafter shoot whenever we see a target."

"Blaze away; we shall do the same. We are under the black flag, and our motto will be: 'No quarter!'"

Reynolds was in earnest, and his dogged manner showed how useless arguments would be. Bluff Bruin retired, and, as soon as he was out of range, the hidden Eagle marksmen began to shoot, one after another, in a desultory way. This was kept up until twenty-five shots had been fired, when, as there was no response, the work ceased.

Half an hour later nearly all the Bruins arrived.

The clans fraternized with a spirit which pleased the leaders.

King Bruin let no time go to waste. Taking Hagan, he set out for the village. It was understood that Hagan was to be sent for dynamite, accompanied by men secured at the village, while Bruin was to try and enlist new recruits there.

It was past noon when he returned, and his appearance was greeted with a cheer. Nearly all the men of the village were with him, and all were anxious to drive out the invaders.

His efforts to make converts had been remarkably successful.

The besiegers now numbered ninety-eight men, and on equal terms they would not have feared to attack the outlaws.

Bruin was as energetic as ever. He placed thirty men to watch the two entrances, and divided the others into four parties for mining work. Beckett, aided by his men, had tried to locate the four weakest points of the cave—that is, the thinnest parts of the outer shell—and at each of these it was proposed to dig diligently. Nobody could foresee the result; they might encounter such massive walls of rock that they could only be removed by dynamite, or some other powerful explosive, but they began with zeal.

It was an hour later when Allan Hamilton approached King Bruin and said:

"Chief, I have a request to make."

"Name it."

"I want to enter the cave."

"You had better apply to Captain Burdick. Seriously, what do you mean?"

"Ildah Beckett is in there, and in danger. Her father is in a fever of worry. Girdrock has already shown that he has a fancy for her, and she will doubtless fall to him in a division of spoils. Now, it occurs to me that it is possible for a man to pass their guards and enter the cave. I want to try it!"

Allan made this speech calmly and quietly, but Bruin's temporary attention to the fact that Allan was anxious to help Ildah for her father's sake, as his remarks implied, was lost sight of among greater objects of thought.

"How do you propose to pass the guards?"

"I think there is a chance to slip past them unseen. They will not be very alert along toward morning."

"And after you are once in, what then?"

"I shall try to rescue Miss Beckett."

"This is serious," replied Bruin, gravely. "No sooner do I get my army together than I make the alarming discovery that one of them is crazy. That means you, Hamilton!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

DURING THE NIGHT.

THIS bluff observation was calmly received by Allan.

"I suppose you think that I can't pass the guards?"

"That's just what I do think."

"But you must admit there is a chance."

"A very small one. Suppose you were captured?"

"That's a chance I should have to dare."

"For Ildah's sake!"

Allan frowned, and then smiled faintly.

"For her sake, since you put it that way!"

"Well, Hamilton, I only wish there was hope in your plan. I am sorry for Beckett's daughter, and would gladly help her if I could. Your plan, however, is utterly unsubstantial. You would not have one chance in a hundred of entering, and, even if you could, in such a case what is to hinder our whole force entering, and capturing the enemy's stronghold?"

Strangely enough, he had never thought of this. Bluff Bruin's matter-of-fact objection utterly demoralized him.

"You see how it is, don't you, Allan?"

"Yes."

"I only wish there was something in it," Burke kindly added.

"By my life, I'm going to look for a scheme which *will* have something in it!" Allan declared, turning away with heightened color; but as he did so he came face to face with Ben Ali, and paused.

The Arab spy had not been visible since the coming of the Bruins, and Burke had rather evaded questions in regard to him. He was back at last, however, and he abruptly announced that he wished to see the chief alone.

Allan went his way, and the other two men remained in conversation for half an hour. Their manner was grave and earnest, giving rise to a general opinion that they spoke on matters of importance, but when they separated, neither volunteered an explanation to their companions.

Mining operations ceased at dark. At each of the four points attacked some progress had been made, and one party of diggers had found no fixed stones to delay them. They had emphatically "made their mark."

A feeling of general encouragement had been awakened.

No further sign of the invaders had been seen.

The allies went into camp, and, after the manner of such adventurous men, they did not let the situation interfere with story-telling and joking. Carlotta, who had been very silent all day, would not accept any company, and Bruin, Beckett, Ben Ali, and Allan made a party by themselves until a late hour.

They had just decided to follow the example of most of the other men and retire when all thoughts of sleep were suddenly banished.

A rifle-shot suddenly sounded—one single report, and that, too, from the edge of the allies' line—but it was followed by wild, loud yells which all at once knew were not uttered by Eagles or Bruins. They were beyond the outposts, and toward the entrance to the cave.

Bluff Bruin bounded to his feet.

"A sortie!" he exclaimed. "Well, let them come; we are ready. To arms, men—to arms!"

The last words were shouted in a loud, clear voice, but it was the only way to make them heard. Pandemonium seemed to have broken loose in the ravine which led to the cave. The outlaws had come forth, and they were rushing upon the allies with startling yells.

Bruin was not troubled to surmise what it meant. It was not a challenge to a regular, decisive battle, but the enemy relied upon the advantage of a surprise, and hoped to deal the allies a deadly blow before they could rally.

A grim smile swept over Bruin's face. He had too much of a soldier's instinct to have left the way open for such a surprise. He had stationed several of his best men at the most favorable points, and every sleeper had lain down with his rifle beside him.

The sortie party soon discovered this to their cost.

Through the ravine they came in a body, yelling like fiends, but the moment that Bruin's voice sounded the air seemed full of thunder and lightning. Every rock seemed to hold a marksman; flashes of light shot up spitefully; and as the sharp cracks sounded, a shower of lead went tearing through the outlaws' lines.

The "surprise" had been a sorry failure, but the voice of Burdick rose urging on the men, and they did not falter perceptibly. Yelling like fiends they flung themselves upon the allies, and the fight became hand-to-hand.

The assailants were desperate men to whom fighting was a pastime, and they sprang at their adversaries like tigers. They were well met. Led by Bruin and Beckett the allies stood like rocks, and their fire was most disastrous. Men fell freely, and the living stumbled over them. Revolver and knife did their work, and rival contestants staggered to and fro in deadly grapple.

But the scene could not last long. The con-

templated surprise had proved a total failure, and the outlaw leaders were not willing to sacrifice their men, even though an equal number of the allies fell.

The signal was given to retreat; their followers reluctantly abandoned the contest; and then the wave rolled backward.

Allan Hamilton had been among the fighters, and he had done his best. These men were outlaws and desperadoes, and they were the captors of Ildah Beckett. For her sake he could fight like a tiger, and he maintained his right to be in such fast company.

But when the retreat began an idea flashed upon him. He had coveted a chance to enter the cave. Was it not now at hand? He could join the fleeing outlaws and, in the darkness, enter as one of the gang.

It was no time for elaborate thought—he could not pause to consider what he was to do when once in the cave—and he did not try then. He simply acted on his idea.

The outlaws retreated, and he went with them.

Once in their midst it would have been hard to turn back if he had been so inclined, and he was swept along almost without effort on his part.

The entrance was passed; he was at last in the cave.

The reserve force was there, but they had other work to do than to notice him. Alert Burke Bruin had conceived the hope that a bold push at this juncture would give the allies possession of the cave, and they came sweeping along at the fugitives' heels.

A desperate fight ensued at the entrance.

Bruin himself, led the assault, and every effort was made to pass the narrow portal. As only a few men could work on either side, nobody could use rifles, and it was once more hand-to-hand.

Only the boldest men participated, and it was a fight never to be forgotten. Again and again Bruin and his men flung themselves upon the defenders; again and again they were driven back. But, furious as was the struggle, Bruin did not lose his head. He soon saw the folly of the attempt—the enemy had had time to recover from their panic, if there had been one—and he would not slaughter his men.

He gave the signal to retreat. One moment the battle raged as fiercely as ever; the next, not one of the allies remained who was able to retreat.

And Allan Hamilton?

The second fight had been a blessing to him, for it prevented any immediate scrutiny. Each man had enough to attend to without meddling with his neighbors. Allan saw that he had a reprieve, as it were, and determined to make the most of it.

He remembered that part of the cave very well, and he determined to make a prompt effort to reach Ildah. He had held on to his rifle, and, still grasping it, he hurried away through the winding passages toward what had been the domestic part of the cave in Queen Eagle's day.

He soon discovered that there, as in other parts of the cave, the scene had changed.

As he neared his destination he found the passage well lighted by torches thrust in the wall, and, as a voice called upon him to halt, he looked ahead and saw a barricade over which lay several rifle-barrels.

"Stop where you are!" added the concealed speaker. "We will shoot the first man who approaches!"

Allan stopped. He looked in surprise. He recognized the voice, and the state of affairs suddenly became plain.

The women were not prisoners, but they had become warriors in turn, turned their quarters into a fortress, and were defending it against the outlaws.

"Ildah!" he cried, "don't you recognize me? Let me approach; I am a friend."

Ildah's face suddenly appeared above the barricade, and it bore a bright, hopeful expression.

"Come!" she said, quickly; "come at once!"

He obeyed, and was soon behind the barricade. There stood the women who had been thought so helpless, all well armed, all evidently in a heroic mood.

"Has the cave been recaptured?" Ildah quickly asked.

"Unfortunately, it has not; but I have effected an entrance, and am here to help you. Thank Heaven it is as well with you as it is!"

"But is there no hope of relief? Why couldn't the rest come, if you did?"

Allan briefly explained the situation.

"You have made a mistake in coming here," Ildah decisively added.

"How so?"

"The outlaws can storm our position any time that they try in earnest, and there will be only one more victim."

"But can't we leave the cave?"

"How can we? Both entrances are guarded, you say."

This was unanswerable logic, and Allan did not try to combat it.

"At any rate," he pursued, "I can help you fight, if it comes to that."

"I am afraid you have only brought ruin upon your head. I see no hope of escape, and

the outlaws will soon force us to surrender. Do you know why?"

"No."

"Because we hold all the stores. The Eagles had a large supply of provisions, as Girdrock well knows, and the enemy will want the food. Unluckily for them, we—the weak women—are here as defenders of the provisions. Not a thing can they get without storming our position."

"By Jupiter! you are a heroine!" exclaimed Allan, looking admiringly at the brave girl.

"Of course," Ildah continued, "they can overcome us at any moment they make a resolute effort, but even then they will not get the provisions. Come with me!"

She conducted him a few paces away, to where the supplies had been arranged in a row. Just beyond them was a natural cleft in the rocks. All was dark below, but the dashing of a subterranean stream could be heard several yards down the aperture.

"Perhaps you see our plan," Ildah added. "The moment it becomes clear that we are to be attacked, one-half of our force will fight to defend the barricade, while the others will push every article of food down the chasm. Come what may, the enemy shall not profit by their victory. They cannot have brought a large supply of food with them; they can't have the stores of the Eagles; and they will soon be reduced to starvation."

She faced him with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, and he thought he had never before seen such a charming sight. Words of warm commendation were on his lips, but they remained unuttered. One of the women called to Ildah, and she hastened to the barricade, followed by Allan.

There was need of every defender then. One of the outlaws had approached as near as he thought prudent.

"I've got a word fur your ears," he said. "We have dallied with you long enough, and we demand your surrender fur ther last time. Ef you decline, we shall forgit that you are women an' attack ye. What is yer answer?"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE EXPLOSION.

THE allies saw no further fighting that night. They rested on their arms, prepared to meet a fresh attack any moment, but none came. They were encouraged by what had gone before; they had inflicted far more damage than they received. Only a few besiegers had fallen, while the outlaws had lost heavily, owing to the raking fire they had received.

Long after, the survivors who wore the totems of the Bear and Eagle talked of how Bluff Burke and Ben Ali had fought that night, and, indeed, their work had been wonderful, but when it was over they lay down and slept peacefully.

They had the innate and acquired nature of the soldier.

Day had barely dawned when word came to Bruin that one of the besieged had appeared with a flag of truce, and that he was wanted. He went at once, and found the envoy to be Reynolds.

Bruin opened conversation with the curt question:

"Well, what is it?"

"We have a word more to say. Are you aware that one of your men is our prisoner?"

"No."

"Such is the fact."

"Who is he?"

"Allan Hamilton."

Bruin started. He had not thought of Allan for some time, but now remembered that he had not seen him since the fight. He also remembered the young man's assertion that he meant to enter the cave.

"How was he captured?" he asked, after a brief pause.

"He was taken in the cave, but how he got there I swear I don't know. Perhaps you do."

The truth, which had seemed so obscure to Reynolds, flashed upon Bruin, but he saw fit to disregard the point.

"So he is your prisoner. Well, what of it?"

"Simply this: We now have him and several women, including Beckett Eagle's daughter, in our hands. We propose to use them to our own advantage. We are at Hermit Hump to dig gold, as we claim a perfect right to do; but though we can hold this cave a year against you, we can't dig gold while the siege continues. Neither can your party. Now, we propose that you leave us alone, and, taking all your men, Bruins and Eagles, south of the neutral valley, let us peacefully occupy the territory once held by the Eagles."

"Is it for this you have called me here?"

"Yes."

"Then you can go back as soon as you see fit. We emphatically decline to comply with such a request."

"You forget our prisoners."

"What of them?"

"Simply this: If you make a treaty, and swear to keep it sacredly, we will release all. If you refuse, we shall hang Allan Hamilton at sunset, to-night, and the female prisoners must each and all choose a husband and settle down

with us for life. Tell Beckett Eagle that his daughter, Ildah, will be Girdrock's wife."

"Reynolds," quickly replied King Bruin, "do you say seriously that you would countenance all this?"

"I do," the lawyer grimly answered.

"Then you are a bigger villain than I thought you."

"Bear in mind one thing, I have cut away from the old life, and from this time on I am a doomed man if I am caught—which I don't intend to be. I can be no worse off by adding to my crimes, and I shall play the best cards I can find. Do you accept my offer?"

"Emphatically, no!"

"Then Hamilton hangs at sunset."

"Hark ye, my man, I have one word to say on this subject. Sooner or later our siege will be successful, and when that time comes, if we find that you have harmed one of your prisoners, I will give you, and Burdick, and Girdrock, over to a fate which will appall you."

"We take the risk," Reynolds laconically replied.

"Think twice before you invite such a fate."

"Do you really refuse my proposal?"

"I do."

"Then I will retire until five o'clock, giving you until then to meditate—to yield. If you then refuse, the penalty of your selfishness will be upon our prisoners' heads."

The speaker lifted his hat in a mocking farewell, turned, and went back to the cave. Bruin's rifle shook in his strong hands, so intense was his desire to disregard the white flag and give the scoundrel his due at once. A hand was laid upon Bruin's arm. He turned and saw Carlotta.

Her face was almost colorless, and, fearful that she would fall, overpowered by her emotions, he caught her arm in a firm, kindly grasp.

"Carlotta, you should not have come here!" he said, gravely.

"It is my punishment," she gasped; "but, oh! it is more than I feel able to bear!"

"I must protest against your view of the case. This is merely one of the results of war. You are not—"

"But for me it would never have happened. It is all my fault, and now I see those innocent persons at the mercy of scoundrels who know not mercy. Poor Ildah!"

"Be firm, Queen Eagle!"

"I am not Queen Eagle! I am only a wretched woman whose obstinacy has recoiled upon herself. Leonard Bruce, let me do you, at least, justice before it is too late. I have condemned you, and believed in Reynolds and Rogerson, only to see both prove themselves villains. This is proof enough, and I bend my stiff, proud neck and acknowledge that I have been worse than blind; I have been perverse, unreasonable—"

"Say no more, Miss Allison. Do not wrong yourself."

"That is impossible. I am nearly done. All I have to add is that I now believe I have wronged you and your father. Can I believe Rogerson, who has shown himself a villain, against Ben Ali? No, no; I feel that I have been wrong. I feel that Gordon Bruce was innocent."

"Thank Heaven for that!" Bruin said, in an unsteady voice. "You do my poor father no more than justice. And—and the missing money—"

"I believe what you have already said; that Eben Reynolds spirited it away."

Bluff Burke's face was full of light and happiness.

"Carlotta, will you take my hand?"

"I am not worthy. There are those in yonder cave who are the victims of my folly."

"You do yourself injustice, but let me say of them that I do not intend they shall be victims. We have until five o'clock to render our ultimatum. It may be more emphatic than the outlaws expect. Keep your courage awhile longer, for this day is to be one of activity on our part. Do not give way to despair."

The coming of Beckett Eagle and Ben Ali interrupted them, and Carlotta turned away. As she did so she caught the Arab spy's glance, and its unusual friendliness brought tears to her own eyes. She did not speak, however.

Mining operations, looking forward to breaches in the cave, were resumed and carried forward with all possible dispatch. Every man who could work to advantage was placed at that point where they had progressed so rapidly the day before, and, greatly to their joy, they still had more earth than rocks to remove.

It was a desperate fight. All felt that the outlaws' threats would be kept, and that Allan at least would be doomed if they did not effect an entrance before night. Bruin oversaw all, and the men worked for the lives of those they wished to rescue.

The afternoon was half gone when Bruin was summoned from the main entrance, where he had gone temporarily, by the announcement that the miners had struck rock in the main excavation. He went at once to that point, and found a perpendicular ledge where only earth had confronted them before.

It was discouraging, but there were fissures

in the ledge, and something might come of that. He consulted with Beckett. Did the lieutenant believe they had reached the wall of the cave?

Beckett was uncertain, nor could they decide where the fissures ended. Bruin directed his men to bring him a flaming torch. He thrust it into the largest fissure. If the latter ended in rock, or earth, there would be no motion of air. If, on the contrary, there was a vacant space beyond, there was likely to be a draught.

The result of the experiment was anxiously awaited. Then Bruin sprung to his feet. There had been an unmistakable suction.

"Bring all the spare powder here!" ordered the resolute leader, promptly. "But, remember, men, silence is essential here. They must not suspect what we are doing."

A large supply of powder had been brought from the Bruin cave, and from the village, and Burke proceeded to see that this was properly placed for a blast. Only such fissures as seemed air-tight at the further side were touched, but they were filled with all the care of experienced miners.

By four o'clock all was ready for the great event, and on this the besiegers staked everything. If it failed nothing could save Allan Hamilton, and the same remark might if Reynolds spoke the truth, be applied to the woman.

Nearly all the allies had been gathered at one point, and that as near the scene of the expected explosion as was safe. If it proved a success, and a breach was made, they would then rush forward in a body and try to carry the cave by storm.

The fuse was lighted, and then the hardy adventurers crouched behind the protecting rocks and awaited the result. It was a time of painful suspense. If the explosion failed—they dared not consider that. If it succeeded, they had to rush in and meet a foe that outnumbered them, but whom they hoped to take by surprise.

Suddenly the shock came.

The mountain seemed to tremble to its base; a tremendous roar broke upon the air; and then earth and rocks went shooting skyward in a cloud so thick that no one could see what was beyond.

But these obstructions and the smoke cleared, and the most sanguine of the besiegers were surprised. A great, yawning cavity appeared in the side of the hill, and the men could not repress a cheer.

Bluff Bruin sprung to his feet.

"Forward, men!" he cried. "The way is open. Forward!"

And then they swept toward the breach, while the descending shower of earth and stones fell unheeded upon them, and plunged into the gap in a body.

What awaited them beyond, no man knew.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

HILT TO HILT.

LED by Bluff Bruin the allies swept forward, and they found a broad, though terribly rugged, way before them. The powder had done great execution, and opened a road to some subterranean place. There was certainly a wide gap there. There, too, was utter darkness, and their speed could not have been kept up had it not been for Bruin's foresight in providing torches.

Enough of these were carried to make the advance rapid and safe.

For one hundred feet the flickering light fell on perpendicular walls of rock which might have been made by Titanic hands, but which had been rent and displaced by the explosion. Then the assaulting party suddenly emerged where their lights were not needed.

A cheer broke from those who wore the totem of the Eagle; they were in their old cave.

They looked upon a peculiar scene. A small number of the outlaws were there—probably twenty-five—and they were looking about in stupid wonder. Plainly, they had not recovered from the shock and surprise of the explosion.

Bluff Bruin saw their chance—if these men could be swept away before the others were met, it would be a great thing.

"Forward!" he shouted, and the war-cry of the Bear and Eagle pealed forth in all their weird, wild fervor.

The handful of outlaws saw the danger, but no one seemed to lead them. No voice arose to give an order, and alarm was added to their stupidity. They turned to retreat, but not soon enough to save themselves. The allies fell upon them with the fury of tigers, and the smaller party went down like chaff. Scarcely any of them managed to make resistance, and many, finding their retreat cut off, threw down their arms and surrendered.

The fight, such as it was, was at its height when a man came running into the place with a drawn sword in his hand. His eyes were wild and unnaturally large, but it was clear that he did not understand the state of affairs.

It was Captain Burdick.

He unclosed his lips as though to give some order, but it was never given. The alert eyes of Ben Ali had at once distinguished him, and

the spy caught up a fallen sword and sprung toward his old enemy.

Burdick saw that terrible sight and recoiled. His face grew deathly white, and his sword almost fell from his hand. He knew what that encounter foretold; he knew just how little mercy he might expect from the man from whom he had been hiding ever since the affairs at the valley retreat.

"Now!" shouted Ben Ali, with an expression on his strong face which was like a terrible smile; "now we meet. Ha! Carl Rogerson, it was a long trail, but it is ended at last. It is your life or mine; we will settle it here, hilt to hilt!"

Feebly Burdick put up his sword, but it was a mockery of a defense. One blow of the Arab's blade sent his own spinning away, and he was helpless before his implacable enemy.

Ben Ali drew back his arm.

"This for Gordon Bruce!" he cried, in a ringing voice.

Another movement and the sword would have been driven forward, but a hand was placed on Ben Ali's arm. He turned and saw Carlotta.

"Wait!" said the Scarlet Queen, in a thrilling voice. "He has not confessed!"

New fire flashed in the Arab's eyes.

"Dog!" he cried, "let your perjured lips tell the truth for once. Your lies have crowded truth to the wall, but it will have its day now. Confess that you killed Gordon Bruce!"

Captain Burdick, the terrible, fell upon his knees.

"Spare me!" he shrilly pleaded. "I will tell all. Gordon Bruce was innocent, and he never harmed Edmund Allison. I caused the death of both. I wanted their valuables, and I betrayed them to the Bedouins of the desert. They attacked our camp, and Bruce and Allison fell while fighting the common foe, back to back. I, alone, was guilty, but I have repented."

The craven subtlety of the last words fell upon deaf ears and heedless minds. Ben Ali lifted his clasped hands.

"Now praise be to the King of men, be He Allah, or the God of the West!" he devoutly said. "By His aid perjured lips have spoken the truth."

Carlotta turned away and stood facing Bluff Bruin. Tears flashed to her eyes, but he laid his hands kindly on hers.

"Say nothing now," he said, in a deep voice. "There is more work for us to do."

Beckett Eagle approached, dragging one of the prisoners.

"This mis'ble critter sez ther roof o' ther cave hez fell in an' buried all ther rest o' ther band alive, an' byther great, jumpin' kangaroo, I reckon he's right. Things is knocked out o' plumb hyar, an' you can't depend on nothin'."

"Polk Bruin," ordered Burke, "take the five nearest men and guard the prisoners. All others follow me; we will settle this. Becket, keep beside me."

They went, but the Eagle lieutenant soon uttered a cry and pointed to the left.

"Ther scamp tol' ther truth. He said they was in thar, an' you kin see that ther passage is gone. That rock has did ther biz—lucky ther hull roof didn't cave in."

"Press on!" ordered Bluff Burke.

They went, and Beckett led the way with long steps toward that part of the subterranean abode where he hoped to find Ildah. And they soon came upon a peculiar scene.

In the passage stood Eben Reynolds, talking rapidly and sawing the air with his long arms, and his manner was so peculiar that all paused to listen.

"Say what you will, you owe your lives to me. Only for me you would all have been dead now. I have kept up an outward show of brutality to deceive the outlaws, but I have all along been covertly working for you. I counseled mercy, delay; anything to prevent violence. Believe me, your very lives are owing to my mercy, and now I ask you to intercede for me, explain all to the allies, and see that no harm is done me."

Beckett Eagle broke into a laugh almost starting in its volume.

"Ha! ha! you old rascal!" he cried, "you've got a lawyer's 'ily tongue left, ef you hev turned outlaw, ain't ye? Ildah, gal, come out from behind that barricade an' see yer old pap!"

For he had caught sight of his daughter, and a great weight was lifted from his mind.

Reynolds wheeled, grew pale and cowered back against the wall, but Allan Hamilton sprung over the top of the barricade and hurried toward the new-comers.

"Saved!" he exclaimed. "By Jupiter, men were never more welcome than you! We've been penned up here, expecting an attack every moment, ever since I came in. By the way, don't pay any attention to this rascal of a Reynolds. He's just been trying to convince us he is our friend, but the conversion is too mighty sudden to be genuine."

Ildah had hastened forward and was clasped in her father's arms, but Bluff Burke saw nothing of this. He had been looking at Reynolds with a withering glance, and now, seeing Carlotta near, he broke the silence.

"Who triumphs now, Eben Reynolds?"

"You do, of course," the lawyer replied, trying to speak glibly, "and I am not sorry. That ruffian of a Burdick has forced me to obey him, when my very soul revolted—"

"Enough of this!" thundered the king. "You need not think you can wheedle us into new errors with your oily tongue. I tell you frankly, the best thing you can do is to confess. Refuse to do this, and we will treat you as you threatened to treat Allan Hamilton—you remember you were going to hang him. No words! Will you confess?"

"What do you want to know?" asked the lawyer, sullenly.

"The truth about Samuel Elbridge's money. You were his lawyer, and you know what a cranky, vacillating old man he was, and how he made a new will every month, first leaving his money to one of his nephews, and then to the other; and how he finally died and left a will, by the terms of which his executors were to hold his estate five years in trust, and then a new document was to be read for the first time, and the property left as therem directed.

"His nephews, Gordon Bruce and Edmund Allison—they were second cousins—went abroad together, and both were murdered by Bedouins, set on by the traitor cook, Carl Rogerson. Each of them left a child. I, Leonard Bruce, am the son of one; Carlotta Allison is the daughter of the other.

"You, Reynolds, were one of the executors of the will—the only active one. When, at the end of five years, the principal document was read, it was found that Elbridge had left twenty-five thousand dollars to charity; fifty thousand to Gordon Bruce; and the remainder to Edmund Allison. The estate had been supposed to be worth one hundred and fifty thousand, easy.

"Only about seventy thousand, all told, was to be found, and Edmund Allison's heiress, Carlotta, was left without anything. Now, I accuse you of having stolen the missing money. Will you confess?"

"Why not?" Reynolds replied, with reckless defiance. "I have played my cards and lost; the devil has at last gone back on me; I have fled from Kentucky to avoid arrest for shooting a man in a fit of temper; and as I am at the end of my rope, I may as well confess all."

"Yes, I was responsible for the deficit in Samuel Elbridge's estate, and when Carlotta so rashly accused *you* of being the thief, she was away out of the bounds of reason. I was the thief; I, alone! I reckon the girl is now sorry she did not take one-half of *your* fortune, when you vainly offered to divide."

"But the stolen money—where is it?"

"That," replied the ex-lawyer, a crafty gleam appearing in his eyes, "is what you will never know!"

Before any one could prevent it, he thrust a revolver against his breast and pulled the trigger. Bluff Burke was too late to catch him; the suicide fell to the ground.

Beckett Eagle was right about the majority of the outlaws being buried alive. The explosion had been far-reaching in its consequences, and a rock weighing several tons had fallen and shut them into one of the smaller chambers.

Many of the Bruins and Eagles were in favor of leaving them there in one common grave, but the king was more merciful. A little digging at one point would liberate them, and the work was done, and they were released. By that time they were humble enough to accept any terms, and so the great victory was won with but little loss of blood.

Girdrock was among those entombed, but not among the rescued. He had been crushed lifeless by the falling rock. It was well so, for Ben Ali, by patient labor a few days preceding the closing scenes of the drama, had learned what had become of the gold-dust stolen from the Eagles.

It had been buried near the village by Girdrock, and had not his cupidity led him to make another attempt on the Eagle treasury, he might have enjoyed his ill-gotten wealth; but by watching him the Arab spy had learned where it was buried, and Girdrock's life had finally gone out like a candle.

Eben Reynolds's attempt at suicide had not been instantaneously fatal. He lived two days, and, before he died, weakened and gave the desired information concerning the money he had stolen from the Elbridge Estate.

It was announced that Captain Burdick, otherwise Carl Rogerson, had been shot, while attempting to escape, by his guard. This guard was Ben Ali. There were those who thought this significant, but they, like King Bruin, asked no questions.

Three months later three persons stood together a hundred miles from Hermit Hump. They were Bluff Burke, Ben Ali, and Carlotta. They had said farewell to all others of the clans of the Sable Circle; more farewells were about to be said.

Great changes had taken place at Hermit Hump. The once-rival clans had become one, under the leadership of Polk Bruin, and the ban

of the Sable Circle had been withdrawn. All men were free to come there then.

Beckett Eagle, Ildah and Allan Hamilton had said good-by to the others and gone East, where, it was understood, the young couple would be married. They went with the good wishes of all.

Pollock, the ex-cowboy, had become a good citizen, but his old associates, the outlaws, had received a taste of punishment.

And now King Bruin, Carlotta and Ben Ali had left the Eagles and Bruins forever, but, before they went, the gold-diggers had seen Burke and Carlotta married, and had cheered them to their hearts' content. The newly-made husband and wife were *en route* for their old home, but to that place Ben Ali refused to go.

His heart had turned to his native land. He had loved Gordon Bruce, and, knowing Rogerson to be his old employer's murderer, he had set out to obtain vengeance. It was near the end of the long search when he joined the Bruins, of whom Gordon Bruce's son was the leader.

He did this because he knew Rogerson had a brother among the Eagles, serving under a false name, and with the hope that Carl would appear. The brother, however, knew nothing about Carl, his crimes, or his connection with Queen Eagle or King Bruin.

Patiently Ben Ali had searched, but his troubled heart had at last found peace; his old master was avenged.

And now he was to part with Leonard Bruce.

"I would gladly have you with me in my new home," said the ex-king, kindly, as he looked at his swarthy friend.

"And so would I," added Carlotta.

"I thank you both," Ben Ali answered, "but my face is turned toward the East. My home is there, and there are the graves of my ancestors."

"So be it, and we wish you all good fortune," Bruin continued.

"Even as we shall often think of you with gratitude and friendly affection," declared Carlotta.

"Your kind words make my heart soft," said Ben Ali, in an unsteady voice. "I almost forget that I am a warrior. I, too, shall think of you. When I march over the burning sands, or camp by the green oasis, or lie at night under the clear sky, I shall remember the days when I wore the totem of the Bear, and the scream of clan Eagle was sounded from the cliffs; and, most of all shall I remember those who were rulers of the noble bands. Farewell, both! I love you well, and often I shall grieve for you, but the place of every man is on his native soil. Queen Eagle, farewell! King Bruin, son of my old master, and friend of my heart, farewell! May you never more know sorrow!"

He had shaken hands with both: he now turned and walked rapidly away.

When a hundred yards distant he turned and waved a farewell; then he disappeared forever from their sight.

Bruin turned to Carlotta.

"So you and I must some time part, but I hope it will be years hence."

"It will only be when death separates us," she softly answered, "and then we shall only part to meet in the eternal world!"

They walked on, and their feet have never since trod the canyons of Hermit Hump.

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